



電擊文庫

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト：黒星紅白

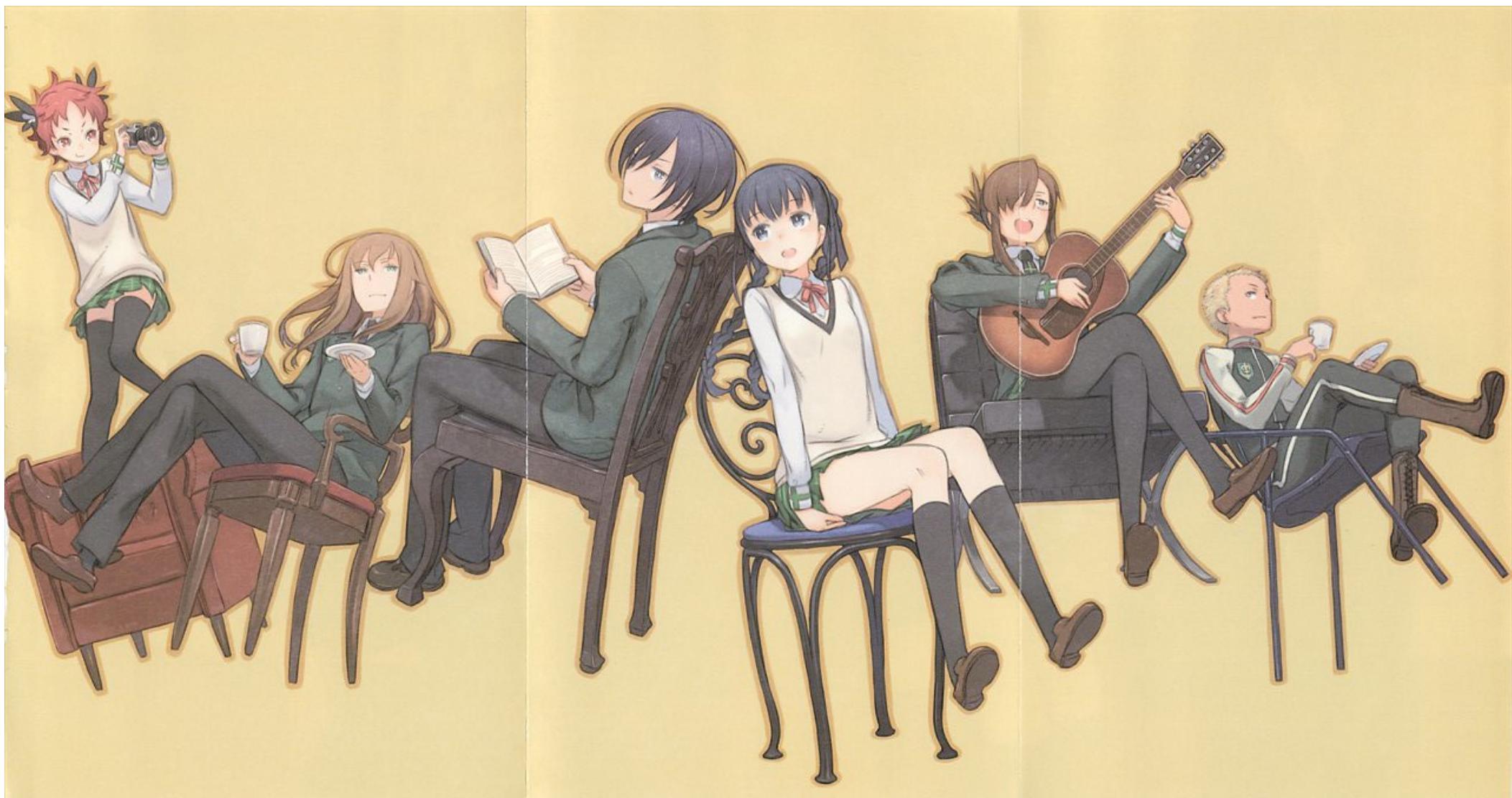
ILLUSTRATION: KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

メガネとセロソロ VI

第四上級学校な日々







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メグとセロン

第四上級学校な日々

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Chapter 1: Leena and Kurt

<Hello, Maxwell residence.>

<Hello! This is Strauski Kurt! Hiya, Big Bro! How're you doing?>

<Pardon me?>

<Whoa, since when were you a girl?>

<H-how rude! I've been a girl since the day I was born. And my name is Leena. Leena Maxwell. If you're looking for my brother, he's not home at the moment.>

<What? But this is his phone number, right?>

<Yes, but this is his home phone. Seron's at the Capital District for school.>

<I get it! Right! Sorry about that. I forgot!>

<As long as you know. But who are you? Are you Seron's friend?>

<Uh-huh!>

<...Hasn't anyone taught you you should use more polite language when you're talking to a stranger?>

<My teachers did, yeah!>

<Of course.>

<But it's too hard cause I'm from Sou Be-II! Take that!>

<Hmph. Are you from cross-river?>

<Uh-huh. Me and my dad and mom and sister and brother moved here across the Lutoni. We've been living in the Capital District for two years.>

<Are you attending secondary school with Seron?>

<No way. I'm only 12. Still in primary school>

<What? Then you're the same age as me!>

<Really?>

<Yeah! I'm a sixth-year in primary school. I'm starting secondary school next year. I thought you were one of Seron's classmates.>

<Then that means we're contemporaries!>

<Your name was Kurt, right? Your Roxchean's really good. And you don't even have an accent! Are you secretly an Easterner? You can't fool me that easily, you know.>

<C'mon, do these look like a liar's eyes to you?>

<Yes.>

<Wow! So Roxcheans can see over the telephone!>

<I have a special power, you know. Nobody else can do it! You should be grateful I decided to pick up the phone today.>

<Huh? So who usually picks up?>

<The butler or one of the maids, obviously.>

<That's amazing. You must be really rich.>

<My mom's the amazing one. Anyway, if you really are a Westerner, say something in Bezelese.>

<Hm...all right! _____, _____, _____!>

What do you think?>

<...Okay, I believe you. What did you just say?>

<Can I trust you to keep this a secret?>

<...No.>

<Your name was Lina, right?>

<It's Leena!>

<But that's hard to pronounce. Lina sounds cuter!>

<Cuter?! Ugh, fine! You're so immature, Kurt!>

<Thanks! I get that a lot.>

<It wasn't a compliment! Your Roxchean stinks!>

<I was just joking.>

<Ugh. Boys. All right, my super-immature Western contemporary Kurt. What do you want with Seron?>

<Oh, I saw him the other day and he said I could come visit during the holidays after finals, and he'd show me around the Capital District. I was gonna ask him when I could come.>

<You met Seron? Where?>

<The 4th biggest capitalist secondary school.>

<The 4th Capital Secondary School, you mean.>

<Ding-dong! You're really good at riddles, Lina!>

<That was too easy. Anyway, when did you meet Seron? Did you get to go on a tour of the school? I've only been there once.>

<I went to watch the drama club perform. My sister's not in the drama club, but she's in the chorus club so she sang in the play. So my whole family went to see her look cool on stage together!>

<I see. So your sister goes to the 4th Capital Secondary School too.>

<Yep. Her name's Megmica.>

<But what's Seron got to do with the drama club? ...Oh, I remember now! He went back to school as soon as summer break started to help out with the drama club!>

<Yeah! He was helping out, taking tickets and taking people to their seats. I saw him in real life in person for the first time, and he was really cool and good-looking!>

<'In real life in person'? ...Obviously he's handsome. He's my brother!>

<Then are you pretty, Lina?>

<O-of course I'm—it's a shame I can't show my beautiful face to a Westerner like you!>

<I don't mind.>

<Whaaaat?>

<So that's when I talked with him about that thing before!>

<I see.>

<And I met this muscular guy named Larry Hepburn, too. Do you know him, Lina?>

<Obviously! Larry and Seron've been best friends since they started secondary school. He's slept over a few times. And unlike Seron, Larry's really outgoing and cheerful.>

<So Big Bro Seron's *not* cheerful?>

<Well...not if you compare him to Larry. In a good way, though.>

<Huh. About Big Bro Larry, I heard he's actually a really amazing guy! He's from this really famous military family!>

<That's right. Everyone knows the Hepburn family. There's Hepburns still serving the country right now!>

<Wow. Now I really want his superintendence!>

<Do you even know what that means, Kurt?>

<Uh-huh! And Johan too—Johan's my kid brother, by the way. We're both gonna join the military someday! I'm gunning for the Royal Army so I can join the cavalry and ride all the time! Johan's gonna enlist with the Royal Navy and command a big battleship.>

<Whatever. You won't have much to do since there aren't gonna be any more wars.>

<Doesn't matter. A man's gotta be strong!>

<Sure, sure. How was the play? While you're at it, tell me more about the secondary school. Seron never tells me anything.>

<Hm. Does he not like you, Lina?>

<He does too! Now tell me!>

<It was great! Really fun.>

<Like how?>

<Well, it's about this king who puts on a disguise and—>

<I know that story. Everyone in Roxche does. Tell me more about the students. How was their acting, and the music and stuff?>

<Oh, that. Let's see...the acting was awesome! They were like, really realistic! Even *my* heart started beating real fast when the king and the village girl were on stage together. It was like they were actually a couple!>

<As if. They're just really good actors, I bet.>

<You think? They looked really close, though. That hug at the end when they said goodbye—I was so sure they were this close to kissing!>

<How delusional.>

<What's 'delusional' mean? Anyway, they had a live orchestra playing the music, and they were really good too. It was like listening to a record! My favorite was this one part where this tall girl with glasses played a solo. She was the best! And guess what? After that, she talked to my sister! And it turns out she's the same age as my sister and she's a friend of Big Bro Seron too.>

<Hm. So Seron has friends in the orchestra, huh.>

<Her name's Natalia Steinbeck. Actually, I talked on the phone with her before! And I heard she came over to play before when I wasn't home.>

<The Steinbecks are supposed to be a famous musician family. Do you suppose she's related?>

<Dunno. Oh, there was this other cool person. He was this skinny guy playing the evil knight, and he was really good-looking. He was really cool! You wouldn't believe how fast he swung his sword! I bet he's a really good fighter.>

<It's just an act. Good actors can make it look like they can do those things skillfully.>

<You think so? Anyway, he looked like a friend of Big Bro Seron too. I saw them talking—apparently his name's Nicholas Browning.>

<You have a good memory.>

<Remembering people's names is my specialty. That guy had long hair like a girl and he was built kind of like one too. Even from up close you can't tell he's a guy.>

<It sounds like Seron has a lot of interesting friends. Wish he'd tell me more about them at home.>

<Me and Big Sis and Johan talk about our friends all the time at home.>

<I suppose it's only natural. For the past three years I've only seen Seron over the breaks.>

<Don't cry, Lina!>

<I'm not crying! Stupid Kurt!>

<Good! Did you know Big Bro Seron and my sister are in the same club? They both joined this summer.>

<Yeah, he told me that much. The newspaper club, right?>

<Uh-huh. I saw the president at the play too, and she was really funny. She's about my height but she brought in these really expensive cameras and—>

<Took photographs to cover the performance for the newspaper club?>

<Bzzt! She only took one photo of the stage. She was actually going around like a spy taking photos of the people there before and during the performance! I saw her pull out a camera from her bag and secretly press the shutter!>

<What?>

<She came over to see Big Sis too. So I asked her, 'what were you doing, chief? I thought you were taking photos in secret'.>

<And what did she say?>

<'It might have looked that way, but I was only taking photos in secret'! Now that's what you call manly! Anyway, she has short red hair and her name's Jenny Jones. Her family runs *the Jones Motors!* She's really really really super-rich!>

<My family's pretty rich too, thanks to our mom. Not as much as the Jones family, though.>

<She was really funny and cool! Big Sis Jenny says it's just the six of them in the newspaper club for now. It's an exclusive club!>

<Huh. Can I ask you something?>

<Yeah?>

<What kind of person is your sister?>

<Big Sis Megmica? Didn't I talk about her? Well...she's scary when she gets mad.>

<That's it?>

<She gets mad if you pull her pigtails.>

<Who wouldn't?! You have to show some respect to girls and their hair. Ugh. This is why boys are the worst. What else?>

<She's a good singer.>

<Obviously she must be, if she's in the chorus club. What else?>

<She doesn't have a boyfriend.>

<I see...and just out of curiosity, does it look like she'll get one anytime soon?>

<I'll bet! Sis is really pretty, you know. She's really great!>

<Ah, I see. I see.>

<But she's too shy, though. She's never dated anyone—she'd have told us if she did.>

<Mhm.>

<But she's definitely pretty! Big Sis Lillianne says she's really popular, too.>

<Who?>

<Oh, Big Sis Lillianne is my sister's best friend. And she's really good at Bezelese. She's better than my family!>

<What? That doesn't make sense.>

<It does too. Cause there's lots of different Bezeleses.>

<I don't get it.>

<Anyway, she says that lots of guys at our school have their eyes on my sister. She doesn't notice how popular she is, but if she did she could get a boyfriend whenever she wanted!>

<Huh.>

<I have a family photo here. You can look over the telephone like you did before.>

<Okay. Hmm...there. I see. Yeah, she's really pretty.>

<Right?>

<I'm gonna ask you one last thing, okay? You don't have to answer, but—>

<Oh c'mon! Don't be like that. There are no secrets between us!>

<Wh-what? A-anyway, has your sister ever said anything about Seron? Were they talking with each other after the play?>

<Hm, not really. I introduced him to my parents after the play. He was really polite and mature. Said something about thanks for the embassy something something. Something hard.>

<That's it?>

<Yeah. Big Bro Larry was talking more with my sister than he was.>

<...>

<What's wrong?>

<No, nothing. Thanks for telling me all this, Kurt.>

<You're welcome. There are no secrets between us.>

<Sure, sure. If you want to talk to Seron, I'll give you the number for the dorms. Ready to take it down?>

<Yeah!>

<It's 01-xxxx. You don't need the area code if you're calling from the Capital District, although you can add it if you want. When the dormitory administrator picks up, just ask for Seron Maxwell. Try to call him in the evening since he's usually out before then. Seron's always reading or studying in the library.>

<Sweet! Thanks, Lina! I love you!>

<Wha->

<What's wrong?>

<Do you mean it?>

<Of course!>

<Ah! I get it! I bet you say that to all the girls!>

<Yeah! Everyone likes it! I became the class hero after I learned that phrase!>

<You're totally different from what I thought a Westerner would be like.>

<Say Lina, you're going to secondary school next year, right?>

<I already told you, yes.>

<Then let's go to the 4th Capital Secondary School together! It's gonna be a blast! All of my sister's friends are gonna be there too!>

<...>

<What do you say?>

<I'll think about it.>

<Can I call you again sometime?>

<...I suppose so, if I'm not busy. Bye now.>

<Bye! See you!>

Chapter 2: The Supervisor

My favorite part about being in the newspaper club?
The fact that things aren't as dull as they used to be.

To be perfectly honest, I found life at the 4th Capital Secondary School tremendously dull.

Primary school was much more interesting. It was a time when, between the ages of six and twelve, I was free to fool around without a second thought.

I wasn't particularly disinclined to moving on to secondary school, or growing up. But secondary school was painfully peaceful.

Students attended secondary school for the sole purpose of moving on to university, ensuring that its population was composed mostly of the same types of people. Students of a certain academic standing, from well-off backgrounds and with good behavior. Although I must admit I also fall into these categories.

Primary school was different.

It was a storm, a chaotic and eclectic mix of students both studious and lazy, well-mannered and delinquent, wealthy and impoverished.

It was messy, it was lively, and it was interesting.

And for two years afterwards I endured the dull drudgery of secondary school.

There was one exceptional moment, however.

One particular day, a male student whose score I beat in equestrian class—hmm, I don't seem to remember his name—a 'faceless classmate' decided to get angry with me.

The faceless classmate had been riding since childhood and stood head and shoulders above the rest of us. His technique with the reins was unmatched, and I recall trying to emulate him during classes.

But his horse unfortunately happened to hesitate during the test, which resulted in a rather subpar grade.

It seemed he was in denial. He could not forgive himself, and he could not forgive me—for I had the serendipitous fortune of receiving the highest grade that day.

After the class, he dragged me into the storage shed under the pretext of receiving assistance for cleaning, and raised his voice at me.

"I'm better than you, dammit!"

"Admit to the whole class that you're inferior!"

"Tell them you messed with my horse!"

"Drop out of class and don't come back again!"

He raved like a drunkard. All things in moderation is key, especially when it comes to alcohol and pride.

Convincing him verbally would have been entirely too much effort, so I resorted to the stick that happened to be lying around. —I'd noticed its presence from the beginning, but let's say I hadn't.

"I'll sue you!" he howled afterwards. Indeed, that was a valid option for him.

All I did was send him flying into horse dung four or so times. But the fact that he rose to his feet to attack again each of those times proved that he wasn't heavily injured.

I first began learning the staff 10 years before that point (I still have no idea why my sisters first took up the art). I knew very well where to strike in order to break bone.

"I am going to sue you out of everything you've got! Dammit, I am *not* a loser!"

It was almost impressive to see the heights of his pride, but I was at a loss.

"No one's a better rider than me!"

I sighed. What was I to do with a frustrated faceless classmate who was half in tears? That was when another classmate, named Seron Maxwell, happened to walk in to put away some equipment. And he solved the situation.

That was when I learned that cleverness and conversational skills were more powerful weapons than violence. Thanks to Seron, I neither dropped out nor ended up in court.

"You were really good," Seron remarked at the end.

How long had he been watching? That he had chosen to hang back without trying to intervene until the end also spoke for his personality. He made a very good impression on me.

And that was the sole exception to my dull secondary school life, until I joined the newspaper club.

The newspaper club punctuated my peaceful days with excitement.

First was the incident in the basement with the mysterious man and the mastermind. It turned out that the most fascinating surprises lie in wait right beneath our noses.

Then came the case of the drama club president and vice-president's mutual crushes. Their love came to fruition before our very eyes.

Then came the beautiful yet senseless serial killings that took place during our trip to the north. I could not empathize with the woman, but—though I would never admit it to the others—I understood where she was coming from.

Then came what appeared to be the case of a girl's crush on Larry, which turned out to be the tale of a secret love forbidden by the chains of the past. Larry and Seron elegantly brought the case to a close.

Looking forward to the next point of excitement in life, I headed to the newspaper club office on the first school day after the fall performance. It was after school on the 8th.

Indeed, there was a surprise waiting for me.

A rather big surprise.

Everyone but Jenny was at the office by the time I arrived.

Jenny's absence was not surprising, as she was often the last to arrive.

Seron, Larry, Nat, Megmica, and I chatted about the fall performance that had taken place two days prior.

I had been on stage, Nat in the orchestra pit, Megmica in the chorus, and Seron and Larry among the audience taking tickets and ushering the audience to their seats.

My performance was a hit, it seemed. Though it made me happy, that was not surprising either.

The surprise came later.
Jenny opened the door.
“Guys, let me introduce our new supervisor!”

I was stunned into silence.

So were the others.

Larry’s hand stopped in the midst of pouring tea, and Nat’s fingers stopped strumming.

Seron’s eyes were wide. I had never seen him so shocked before. He must have thought the same looking at me.

Megmica blinked rapidly, unable to believe her eyes.

“What’s wrong? You guys look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Jenny said with a smile. But considering the situation, there was nothing strange about the faces we made.

After all, the taciturn middle-aged man standing behind her was none other than Mr. Mark Murdoch.

He had lost quite a bit of weight—he was still quite portly, however—but he was without a doubt Mr. Murdoch. There was no mistaking him.

Jenny broke the silence in the office, leaving Mr. Murdoch standing in the hall.

“Well, we need a supervisor if we want to be an official club. School rules. It was hard making sure registration got through. So now we have Mr. Murdoch here as our new supervisor,” she explained briskly, “I’m sure I don’t need to introduce you to him.”

Oh, Jenny. What a superfluous question. We all knew full well who Mr. Murdoch was and the fact that he was responsible for the incident early this summer.

Mr. Murdoch, who had found that his brother—who had gone missing in action during the Lestki Island Conflict—was in fact alive in Sou Be-II, had hidden the man in the school basement to avoid paying back decades’ worth of his military pension. And he had even attempted to kill us when we discovered the truth, although how serious he had been is still a matter of debate.

Suffice to say, it was a shock to see him back at school.

“Why so surprised?” Jenny asked, as though she had read my mind, “The guy in the basement wasn’t Burt Murdoch.”

Which is what the official records should say, at any rate.

Then what of Mr. Murdoch’s crime of imprisoning a total stranger from cross-river in the school basement?

Jenny seemed to have read my mind again.

“And apparently the Westerner wasn’t brought against his will. He lived in the basement cause he felt like it.”

I must say that is an impressive lie.

Then ultimately, Mr. Murdoch’s only crime would be using school property for personal purposes. And if Mr. Hartnett from the Confederation Police didn’t inform the school, the crime would never come to light.

More importantly, it would look bad for the Confederation Police if they took such a trivial case to court, after going so far as to sneak into a secondary school undercover.



“Any questions for me or our new supervisor?” Jenny asked.

The first to reply—the first to regain his ability to speak—was Seron.

“Yes.”

“Yes, Seron?”

Seron looked Mr. Murdoch in the eye.

I looked at Seron.

At times Seron would put on a blank face, as though he were turning into a sculpture.

This was one such moment.

Naturally, I don’t believe for a second that Seron is without emotion. He puts on that look when he is deep in thought.

“Mr. Murdoch, why did you continue to insist the man was your brother?”

Mr. Murdoch tilted his head stoically. And he shot back, “What do you mean?”

“When the Confederation Police was questioning you, you would have been informed by the Sou Be-II embassy that the man officially wasn’t your brother.”

“H-how did you know that?”

Mr. Murdoch’s shock was unsurprising. Our information came from an investigator on the case, though we were told not to mention our source.

“We were told by an investigator by the name of Hartnett,” Seron replied nonchalantly. He probably saw no point in hiding the truth at this point.

“I see...” Mr. Murdoch sighed. It seemed to my eyes that he finally understood that we were working with Hartnett.

“If you’d told the police that you’d made an honest mistake, Mr. Murdoch, then you would have been spared the brunt of the legal trouble,” Seron continued. “From your presence here I can see that things turned out fine for you in the end, but I don’t understand why you continued to claim the man was your brother.”

Seron had a point.

The claim that the man was not really Burt Murdoch was a lie fabricated by the Sou Be-II embassy for his protection, but it was theoretically a convenient one for Mr. Murdoch as well.

“Maxwell...” Mr. Murdoch said, “Do you have any siblings?”

“Yes. A younger sister.”

Leena. Seron’s sister, four years his junior.

“Then answer me this,” Mr. Murdoch continued, “When does your sister stop being your sister?”

Seron could not respond.

I knew what the answer was. If one had to say, she would stop being his sister only in death.

The others must have understood as well.

“He is my brother,” said Mr. Murdoch. “He will always be my brother. My family.”

Seron, myself, and the rest of the club listened quietly.

“Even if I were arrested, I would never have claimed he was a stranger.”

“I see.”

We quietly waited, leaving Seron to continue.

Larry seemed to have something to say, but he remained silent as well. It was very sweet how much he trusted Seron, and I had to say that attitude, among many other things, made me envious.

“Wasn’t there any other way? A way where you wouldn’t have had to hide your brother?”

“No,” Mr. Murdoch uttered.

“What about paying back the pension?” Seron asked. Larry winced. That was probably the question he had wanted to ask, which Seron picked up on and asked instead.

“Twenty years’ worth? I couldn’t afford that. —I admit if I’d sold my house, land, and assets, I could have afforded it,” Mr. Murdoch confessed with surprising courage, “But that would leave me and my wife without a home in our old age.”

I had to give him credit for his forthcoming answer. It was certainly wise to plan ahead for old age. Insurance didn’t cover all of one’s medical bills.

Generally speaking, a Roxchean’s largest household expense tended to be housing, which should not go beyond 30 percent of one’s income. In other words, if one didn’t have to worry about rent or mortgages, one could live comfortably off their pension.

I could see why Mr. Murdoch was reluctant to let go of such a valuable asset as his own home. It was difficult to imagine the three Murdochs living happily together without the things afforded by the pension.

I could not completely agree with Mr. Murdoch’s decision, but I understood where he was coming from. I couldn’t speak for the others, of course.

Seron asked another question.

“About how you ordered your brother to kill us in the basement—”

That was indeed a cruel order, commanding the brother he had imprisoned to kill his students. To be fair, the brother also had reason to take our lives.

Next to Seron, Megmica stiffened visibly. She was the most outraged of us all that day, being a Westerner herself.

I supposed that Seron would ask why Mr. Murdoch gave that order. But he surprised me.

“What did you think would happen when you gave that command?”

It would be no difficult task to hold Mr. Murdoch responsible for his command. But whatever his actions, we made it out unscathed thanks to Larry, Seron, and Megmica. Seron likely assumed that there was no point in asking the attempted murderer before us why he made the attempt.

“Who knows.”

That was his answer.

In other words, he had given the command without even considering what would happen—not even to himself.

Everyone deflated. Nat made a face, and Megmica went from displeased to vaguely sympathetic. Larry pouted with a shrug. That was a habit of his.

Jenny alone stood proud and unchanged.

“So you weren’t thinking,” Seron said mechanically, as though his only intention was confirmation.

Mr. Murdoch’s reply was just as plain. “That’s what happens when you panic. Especially in places like battlefields.”

Larry's expression changed, as a fellow military man. His pout gave way to a serious look.

Seron seemed to be satisfied with the answer. "That's all I wanted to ask. Anyone else have anything to add?"

Seron's previous question seemed to have rendered everyone mute; no one seemed to want to ask anything. In fact, everyone—myself included—shook their heads.

I did not fully understand Seron's intentions, but it seemed that things were now completely cleared between Mr. Murdoch and us.

The incident had never happened. We had no energy and no reason to say anything to Mr. Murdoch anymore.

Jenny grinned. It seemed she didn't care who the supervisor was so long as the club was allowed to exist.

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Murdoch. We're counting on you. Would you like some tea to celebrate your new position?" she asked, looking up at Mr. Murdoch. I almost wanted to know how exactly she would celebrate his new position, but Mr. Murdoch's reply dashed my hopes.

"I've had more than enough poison for one lifetime."

Not a bad retort, I had to admit. Even if I was the only one who would admit such a thing.

Mr. Murdoch turned. "I have no intention of drinking your poisoned tea. If you need anything, you will come to me at the faculty office. I suppose I could take care of whatever paperwork you need done from me," he hissed, and left.

The door slammed shut and left several seconds of silence in its wake.

"UGH! What the hell?! Where's he get the nerve to look his nose down at us like that?!"

As expected, Nat was the first to speak. She whipped her fingers against the strings of her guitar, strumming angrily.

"It is so stunning that I cannot speak!"

Megmica was also outraged, although I could not tell what it was that angered her most.

Indeed, at face value Mr. Murdoch's parting remark was an arrogant one. But Jenny and Seron had seen the truth behind them, it seemed. Seron was as calm as ever and Jenny strode to the sofa to take a seat.

As for Larry, he noticed the distinct lack of anger in Seron's eyes and held himself back. I was impressed.

So I took it upon myself to ask the big question. It wasn't such a bad role to take.

"I notice that you are looking quite untroubled by this, Seron. Jenny," I said, though I already knew why.

"Hm?" Seron seemed to be surprised, but he quickly understood the intent behind my question. "Yeah. Now we have free rein on club activities. I'm really glad," he replied, spelling things out clearly.

"What's that mean?" "What do you mean?" "What're you talking about?" Nat, Megmica, and Larry asked one after another. It seemed they simply had to hear why Seron was keeping such a cool head.

"Mr. Murdoch said that we had to go see him at the faculty office if we needed anything," he replied.

“Yeah. The stuck-up pig,” Natalia spat.

“He is a most terrible teacher!” Meg agreed. Larry, however, waited for Seron to continue.

“In other words, he’s saying he won’t come to the office.”

Indeed. Perhaps Mr. Murdoch was giving us space out of a sense of guilt towards us.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Explain it so a dunce like Larry can understand,” Nat urged, never missing an opportunity to make a jab at Larry, but Larry was not affected by many of them.

“From what I gather,” said Seron, “Mr. Murdoch is saying that he’ll be our supervisor, but only on paper. He’s not coming to our office because he wants to let us do whatever we want.”

“Huh.” “Oh my goodness!” “I get it.”

Nat, Megmica, and Larry finally understood. Everyone was on the same page.

Jenny finally spoke up, as though asserting her position of leadership.

“Now the newspaper club is an officially recognized club at the 4th Capital Secondary School. This is cause for celebration!”

No one disagreed.

“My favorite part about being in the newspaper club? The fact that things aren’t as dull as they used to be.”

When I said so at the newspaper club’s first official tea party, Natalia replied between sips of tea, “Makes sense. It’s just one surprise after another around here.”

“This kind of thing and a normal student life is much different! It is difficult that I cannot report much things to Lillia!” Megmica chimed in, troubled.

Lillia was Megmica’s best friend. It was understandable that Megmica could not report all our goings-on to her. An ordinary secondary school girl might urge Megmica to quit the club if she heard about our exploits.

“It’s definitely spicing things up a lot,” Larry nodded with a chuckle.

Seron simply sipped his tea in silence.

“Too bad I can’t write an article about this,” Jenny sighed in a demonstration of her dedication to the club.

Now, what more could be in store for us?

I am positively giddy with anticipation.

Chapter 3: Wherever you go, There you Remain

The 30th day of the tenth month, the year 3305 of the World Calendar.

“Man, the weather’s great! What a place!” Larry cheered, his eyes on the clear blue sky and his white teeth glinting.

“Yeah. Perfect weather for being out. I can even smell the grass,” Seron chimed in with a nod, looking at Larry’s smile.

“It is a very lovely place! We will do our best work today! Heave-ho!” Strauski Megmica exclaimed, fists clenched in determination.

They were standing in a sea of green.

A thin woodland sprawled out under the clear autumn sky. The trees and grass seemed to stretch on forever, with no wind to blow away the comfortable temperature.

A wide plank walkway snaked across the ground, leading from the plaza and into the woods.

And next to the walkway was a wooden sign.

‘EAST CLARE NATURE PARK. CAMPING, OPEN FIRES, SMOKING, AND FIREARMS ARE PROHIBITED.’

They were not the only ones there.

Gathered in the plaza were about a hundred boys and girls in identical tracksuits issued by the 4th Capital Secondary School.

They were accompanied by about 20 faculty members in faculty-exclusive school-issue tracksuits.

And finally, about a dozen security staff in black uniforms watched over them all.

The grassy plaza was about 200 meters wide and long. On one edge was a large log cabin that housed the park staff, and a bathroom also made with logs.

Students sat around, rested on the grass, warmed up, horsed around, lined up in front of the bathrooms, or simply waited.

Next to the plaza was a large, neatly-paved parking lot that almost touched the trail that led into the woods. Haphazardly parked there were three large buses that had carried the students to the park.

* * *

Earlier. The 11th day of the tenth month.

The drama club’s fall performance had been held five days ago, and the newspaper club’s supervisor issue had been addressed.

The six members of the newspaper club were gathered in the office after school, elegantly partaking in tea.

Because the office was so warm, they had taken off their jackets and hung them on the rack at the entrance. A cool autumn rain was drumming against the window.

“By the way, these notices were being handed out at the faculty office today,” Nick said, fishing out a piece of paper from his bag and placing it at the center of the coffee table.

Five sets of eyes fell on the notice, but the text was so small all they could read was the title.

Natalia leaned slightly forward, breaking her comfortable position against the back of the sofa.

“Let’s see. ‘4th Capital Secondary School Orienteering Day’,” she read out loud. “Man, this font’s too small! What’ve they got against people with bad eyesight? Larry, read it for us.”

“Sure, sure.” Larry gingerly put down his flower-print teacup and picked up the notice. “‘4th Capital Secondary School Orienteering Day’.”

“I just read that. Or does it say the same thing in Bezelese below?” Natalia joked.

“Then I will read the notice!” Meg volunteered, though it was hard to tell if she was joking or serious. Larry politely turned her down and continued to read.

“Orienteering Day will test students’ endurance, knowledge, curiosity, and teamwork. Students must apply in teams alongside members of their own clubs’.”

The school’s very first Annual Orienteering Day would be held on the 30th day of the tenth month, on the first day of the weekend.

The exact location would remain confidential to guarantee fairness, but it would take place at a park about two to three hours by bus from the Capital District. Naturally, the school would rent out the park for the day and security personnel would be present.

Participants were to gather on campus by 7:30 AM. The competition would take place from 10 AM to 1 PM, and they would depart the park at 2 PM. The buses would return to the school between 4 and 5 in the afternoon, subject to traffic.

Lunches would be provided, and there was no participation fee.

The school would set its own custom rules for the competition.

Students had to apply in team of three, with no limitations on gender or age. But all three students had to be from the same club.

There would be five possible set courses with different checkpoints, but the courses had some overlap. All five courses were about the same in terms of difficulty.

The checkpoints would all be located along the trails, and teams had to pass all the checkpoints before heading to the finish line.

At each checkpoint would be a quiz station that would test students’ academic knowledge, and rankings would be based on the time the team took to the finish line and the team’s performance on the quizzes.

The names of the top three teams would be published in posters to be put up around the school, and some prize money would be awarded to their clubs.

The application deadline was the 12th. Interested students were to write down their names, student numbers, and clubs, and hand the forms to the physical education teacher at the faculty office.

There were several warnings as well.

Though the trails would not be difficult to traverse, students would have to be fit enough to walk for an hour or two.

Students were to wear school-issue tracksuits, with their sweaters if the weather was cold.

Students needed to bring bags—rucksacks preferably, to keep their hands free—to fit the provided lunches.

There were no particular restrictions on items students could or couldn't bring.

The event would be canceled in case of rain, and a notice would be posted the day before in case of cancelation.

“That’s all,” Larry finished. Natalia ended her sagely nodding with a question.

“Question.”

“Yeah?”

“What’s orienteering?”

“Are you serious? ... Well, it’s a sport where you walk around in the wilderness with a map, but it’s gonna take a while to explain...”

Seron lent a hand.

“Think of it like running errands. You use a map and a compass to reach your destination. Generally, whoever arrives fastest is the winner.”

It was a simple and clear explanation. Everyone nodded.

“That’s it. Thanks, buddy,” Larry said, putting down the notice.

“I’m no good with maps, though,” Natalia admitted.

“Nor am I,” Meg said.

“Sucks for us, huh,” Natalia sighed. She then gave Meg a deceptively serious look.

“Since Sou Be-II is in the western hemisphere, are north and south by any chance reversed from Roxche?”

“Hm? I wonder...” Meg fell into thought. Larry explained the joke.

“As if, Lia. The cardinal directions don’t change no matter where you are.”

“Tsk, tsk. Can’t let preconceptions color your judgement like that, Larry,” Natalia said, still feigning seriousness, “For all you know, your compass might start pointing east at some point.”

“Obviously, depending on the place,” Larry replied, to Natalia’s surprise. He brought his teacup to his mouth.

“What?” Natalia raised an eyebrow. “Finally going senile, Larry? Even I know that a compass always points north. That’s primary school stuff.”

Seron replied in place of Larry, who was still drinking his tea.

“Technically, a compass doesn’t point to the geographic North Pole. It points at something called a North Magnetic Pole, which is slightly out of line with 90° north. So if you were to pull out a compass while standing west of the North Magnetic Pole, the compass would point east.”

“Yep,” Larry nodded, pulling his teacup away, “But that’s not gonna happen unless you’re exploring the North Sea by ship or sled. The difference is practically negligible from the Capital District.”

“World’s a big place,” Natalia groaned, not having expected a lecture in response to a joke.

Jenny grinned, turning to the silent Nick. “I don’t care about the prize money, but this whole club competition angle’s got my attention.”

“I knew you would say that, Jenny,” Nick replied with an elegant smile.

“What do you mean?” asked Meg.

“Suppose we were to make the top three,” Nick explained. “Our names will be known throughout the school, and the newspaper club would gain some much-needed attention as well.”

“I understand!” Meg replied with a clap. Seron watched happily with a blank expression.

“So far, our only issue was the one covering Stella and the gorilla. We could certainly use some more credentials to our name,” Nick suggested. Jenny frowned.

“And who was it that kept ditching club after school last month?”

“Easy there, Jenny,” said Larry, “Everyone was busy with rehearsals, and Megmica’s pulling double duty with the chorus club. We should be thankful they still managed to drop by once in a while.”

Unable to retort, Jenny held out her empty teacup. Larry picked up the teapot and poured her more tea.

“Hey, I’m doing double duty too,” Natalia complained, but Larry ignored her.

“What do you think, Larry?” Seron asked as Larry poured more tea. The others waited for clarification, but Larry knew what he was talking about.

“It’s not bad at all. It sounds pretty good, actually.”

“Oh?”

“There’s no rule saying we can’t go off the trails. It’s looking pretty good.”

“Great.”

“Hey,” Natalia cut in, “Use Roxchean so the rest of us can understand.”

“All right,” said Seron, getting everyone’s attention, “The notice says we have to visit the checkpoints that are along the trails.”

“Uh-huh.” Natalia nodded.

“I’ve read that real orienteering competitions involve wandering through forests and plains with nothing but a map and a compass. It’s an intense activity where every second counts.”

“Exactly,” Larry added, “It was originally developed as a military exercise. And normally, you have to pass the checkpoints in a certain order.”

Seron continued where Larry left off, “Trails and walkways were incorporated into the exercise when it was adapted for the general public. According to those rules, you have to stay on the road.”

“I get it,” Jenny nodded, but Seron continued for the others.

“But the rules on the notice have been adapted for our school specifically. We can go to the checkpoints in any order, and there’s no rule saying we can’t go off the trails. In other words...”

Nick spoke up loudly. “I understand. Larry is accustomed to outdoor activities and could easily find the shortest routes that cut through the woods. It would be no problem for him to navigate the wilderness with a compass.”

“I see.” “I understand.” Natalia and Meg nodded in unison. Seron also nodded.

“Yeah, but if we end up losing our bearings we’d have been better off sticking to the trails in the first place. So we need an excellent navigator who knows how to use a compass and read the terrain, unless we want to get lost in the forest.”

“Can you do it, Larry?” Natalia asked, eyes narrowing.

“I can’t guarantee it until I actually look at the map,” Larry said, but determination quickly rose to his face. “But I think I can manage.”

“Oh?” Jenny smiled. “Can you guarantee an overwhelming victory? No one remembers second place, you know. It’s number one or bust.”

All eyes were on Larry. He fell into thought. Then—

“I think so. But no plan is completely foolproof. If another club decides to do the same thing as us, we’ll have to beat them with endurance, knowledge, and luck. Just keep that in mind, yeah?”

“Hm.” Jenny nodded, though she did not seem entirely convinced.

“You’ve gotten so mature, Larry,” Natalia chuckled, “Back in primary school you’d have guaranteed victory the second the chief asked. Is Seron rubbing off on you?”

“Maybe. By the way, we have to do this in teams of three.”

“Indeed.” Nick nodded.

“Who wants to team up with me? By the way, I’m calling dibs on Seron.”

“I see.” “Of course.” “Makes sense.” Jenny, Nick, and Natalia nodded.

“Oh my. Why is this so?” asked Meg. But she quickly realized the answer. “It is because of the quizzes! Now I understand. Then Seron is the perfect mole! I mean, role!”

Larry nodded. Seron, who had flinched at the word ‘mole’, quickly recovered and managed to say, “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome,” Meg replied.

Jenny cast a glance at Seron, the happiest student in the room, and asked, “So who’s gonna be member number three?”

“Someone athletic, I suppose?” Nick suggested.

“I’ll pass. I’m too delicate and frail for this,” Natalia said. No one reacted.

“Hm...” Jenny fell into thought, crossing her arms. “All right. President’s orders. Megmica will join Larry’s team.”

“Yes! I may look like this, but it is my specialty to walk! I understand!” Meg replied with a clumsy salute.

For several minutes Seron sat as still as a statue.

But in his heart, he was already galloping through the woods.



* * *

All club activities were suspended for midterm preparations. Then came the midterms themselves. And finally, the 30th day of the tenth month arrived.

“Show ‘em who’s boss,” Natalia said, glasses glinting.

“We have high hopes for you,” Nick joined in.

“Don’t let your guard down for even a second. I don’t need any second place losers in our club,” Jenny warned.

Seron, Larry, and Meg were sitting on the grass. Larry grinned.

“Got it! We’re aiming for gold! I’m more worried about you guys than us, actually.”

“We will take our time,” Nick replied, “Really, our team is more here for a light stroll.”

“It’s just a bit of walking,” Natalia added, “Even I could do that much. You do remember how to walk, Larry? Just stick out your hands and feet one after the other.”

“Do your best, guys. Don’t worry about us,” Jenny finished.

“Worry, huh.” Larry whispered to her, “Don’t overdo it, Jenny.”

Meg tilted her head.

The six members of the newspaper club were all in school-issue tracksuits, but they were equipped differently.

Larry and Seron were wearing small canvas rucksacks of the same design. Meg was carrying nothing.

Larry wore sturdy military boots with laces, and Seron and Meg ankle-high leather boots.

Larry had advised them earlier, *“Keeping your feet in good shape is crucial. Buy yourselves some good hiking shoes and thick socks, and break in the shoes before Orienteering Day.”*

So they had done as they were told, taking walks in their new shoes to break them in.

Natalia and Nick, meanwhile, were wearing small messenger bags, and Jenny a leather camera bag. They wore plain running shoes.

“Line up!”

When the students gathered, the teachers handed out their lunches.

The lunches came in small cardboard boxes, but they were packed enough to be quite heavy.

Each pack also contained a 700-milliliter bottle of juice with a snap-top cap that prevented the contents from spilling. The juice came in orange, grape, and other flavors—students were already exchanging bottles amongst themselves.

Lunch included a cheese-ham-and-lettuce sub sandwich, a piece of fried chicken, a small pack of crackers, a small tube of jam, and a chocolate bar. Tissue was also included.

“That’s all? I need more,” Natalia grumbled when she opened the box. But the others knew that she had gorged on snacks on the bus, had filled her bag with more food, and left an

extra bag of snacks on the bus labeled with a note saying, 'If you touch this bag I will beat you to death with a violin bow', so they showed no reaction.

The students put their lunches into their own bags. But—

"Seron. Megmica. Take out the juice," Larry said, and received Seron and Meg's bottles. Then he took them back to the faculty member handing out the lunches.

"Not gonna get thirsty, Larry?" asked Natalia. Larry put his and Meg's lunch in his own rucksack.

"We brought our own water bottles. The ones they gave us are too heavy."

"I see. But you don't think that sub sandwich is too heavy for you, shortie? I can hold on to it for you."

"I'll enjoy it once we cross the finish line first," Larry replied, putting on his rucksack. In his right hand was a compass with its strap wrapped around his wrist.

The compass was a model used in the military, oiled to perfection so the needle would move smoothly. It had a sturdy brass case and lid. There was a groove through the center of the lid with a wire going through it, used to act as a guide. The compass was also equipped with a miniature magnifying glass for ease of reading.

"Is that your secret weapon, Larry?" asked Nick. Larry nodded.

"Yeah. It's from the Confederation Army. I brought it from home. But it's super expensive—I'd cry if I lost it."

"As much as if you had lost the watch you wear?"

Larry smiled. "Nah."

The Whitfield waterproof military watch whirred smoothly on Larry's left wrist.

After the break, the students gathered at the edge of the plaza, at the entrance to the park.

Students of all ages were in attendance, from first-years to sixth-years. There was a visible height difference between the different ages.

For most people, Orienteering Day was simply an opportunity to enjoy nature with their friends. It was more of a picnic than a competition. The physical education teacher yelled into the megaphone, warning students to not shove one another.

They had received most of the instructions about the day's activities on the bus ride.

Students were permitted to use any tactic that did not involve hindering other teams. Students were free to use compasses and go off the trails if they were confident in their skills. But if they did so, they had to watch out for ponds and streams.

There were no dangerous animals in the park, and because the property was completely fenced in, there was no danger of straying too far.

Teams had to choose one of five courses and go to the checkpoints designated. Park staff would be at the checkpoints to hand out the quizzes, and students had to write down their answers on their answer sheets at the checkpoints. Once they visited all the checkpoints on their route, they would return to the starting point to finish.

Students who decided to give up could return to the starting point as well, or they could report to one of the checkpoints.

The time limit was three hours. At 1 PM all students would be sent back to the entrance.

"We're handing out the maps. Do *not* open them until I give the signal," said the teacher.

Each team received one map. The maps had been rolled up and secured with a string.

The faculty finished handing out the maps and answer sheets. The teacher at the front looked at his watch.

“It is currently 10:30 AM! The competition begins at 10:40!”

This time, many of the students were wearing watches. Those without wristwatches had pocket watches hanging from their necks, as the school-issue tracksuits had no pockets.

Larry looked at his watch and rotated the bezel, marked off in minutes, so that the triangle indicator was pointed at the 40-minute mark.

Now he simply had to look at the numbers marked on the bezel to check how much time had passed. There was no need for calculations and no worry about forgetting their starting time.

“Now, we will do our best for the first place!” Meg chirped, her pigtails swishing. “But I need only to do as we planned. I will follow Larry everywhere!”

Seron nodded blankly.

‘Aw, man. He must have wanted to hear that from her,’ Larry inwardly sighed, but he turned to Meg.

“I’ve got this. We’ll stick to the plan.”

“Thirty seconds!” The teacher began counting down. The students stirred. Some reached for their maps, some began doing warm-ups, and some stood in spirited huddles with their teammates.

“Five! Four! Three! Two! One! Begin!”

Nearly a hundred students set off at the signal. With maps open they headed into the trail.

At first, there was a massive bottleneck because everyone was on the same route. The teachers made sure there was no pushing or shoving.

Jenny’s team joined the crowds and set off immediately, as though entering the school gates in the morning.

Larry’s team, meanwhile, did not take a step.

Larry quickly had Seron and Meg hold the map open parallel to the ground. He opened up his compass and had the others turn to match North on the compass with the map.

The other teams hurried past as Larry scrutinized the map.

The map was about 40 centimeters in length and width, and was at a 1/10,000 scale. One centimeter on the map was equivalent to 100 meters.

Marked on the map were trails, woods, ponds, marshes, bogs, streams, clearings, rest stops, and bathrooms. There was a legend on the bottom right corner.

Ponds dotted the landscape, and streams connected them. At the center of the park was a particularly large pond and a marsh. Wide contours marked off gentle slopes.

Trails crisscrossed the map like a maze.

The trails began at the bottom right part of the map, where the starting point was.

At the beginning of the trail was a bridge that went over a stream, followed by a winding path that led to a fork. The trail broke into three at that point and branched out—from dozens to hundreds of meters—and wound and swerved in every direction like the alleys of an old city.

The checkpoints were numbered and marked out on the map with cute, stylized animal drawings. A rabbit, a bear, a fox, a deer, and a squirrel. They were all clearly colored differently as well.

“They are very adorable,” Meg remarked.

“Yeah. The game’s been adapted so even kids straight out of primary school can enjoy it,” Seron pointed out.

Larry counted the checkpoints. There were six per course.

It was difficult to tell with just the map how to break through the shortest possible route.

“Hm...” Larry groaned.

“It’s more complicated than I expected,” Seron commented. Larry nodded.

“Yeah. But this might work to our advantage.”

Meg looked up. The other students were already disappearing, those in the lead already crossing the bridge and making a turn. Their tracksuits painted the walkways in uniform colors.

Larry had declared earlier that they would confirm their route ahead of time to avoid the chaos at the starting line. And yet Meg still cast him a nervous glance.

With his short blond hair glinting, Larry stared at the map. At times he ran his finger over the routes.

Three minutes passed. Only the faculty were left on the grass. Some gave them worried looks, and others realized what they were doing and waited with anticipation.

“All right!”

Finally, Larry reached into Seron’s rucksack and took out a crayon that was wrapped in cloth to keep it from breaking. It was pink—there was nothing marked in pink on the map.

Larry put his left hand under the map as he drew their route.

He had chosen the ‘rabbit’ course.

The route entailed passing through the rabbit checkpoints. Larry’s pink line followed the trail to a certain point, but it cut straight through plains and woods where the trails took the long way around. The line naturally avoided all ponds and wide streams.

The pink line went through all the checkpoints efficiently, finally returning to the starting line along the trail.

Larry finished mapping their route and checked one more time to see that he had not missed a checkpoint.

“All right! I think this is it!” He looked up, and put away the crayon. “Seron. Megmica.”

Larry looked at his two teammates, who were still holding up the map.

“Will you trust me?”

“Of course.” “Of course,” Seron and Meg replied almost simultaneously.

“Good luck!”

As the teachers waved, Larry’s team headed for the trail.

“We don’t have to run—a fast walking pace is fine. This is closer to a marathon than a sprint,” Larry instructed. Seron and Meg lined up behind him as they briskly covered ground.

Just outside the plaza was a plain and a stream about two meters wide. They crossed the wooden bridge over the stream and turned right, following it for a time.

The stream was deep for its width, with water so clear the small fish inside were clearly visible.

“These fish remind me of my hometown. When I was young, we lived in a place in Sou Be-II with many of these rivers! Around us was a large field. It was a place where much wheats could be harvested,” Meg remarked.

“I’d love to hear more about your hometown one day with the rest of the club, Megmica. Right, Seron?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Then I will tell you very much!”

Ahead of them, between the trail and the stream, stood a rod.

The rod was about 10 centimeters in diameter and six meters long, the colors alternating between red and white every 30 centimeters. A small metal ring was attached to the top.

The rod was sticking out of a metal cylinder fixed to the ground. Meg stopped before it. “What is this stick?” she asked.

“Hm. I’m not sure,” Seron replied, taking a good look.

“It’s a marker,” Larry said.

“What does it indicate?” asked Seron. But Larry did not give him the answer.

“All right. Pop quiz. Look around you.”

Seron and Meg looked around.

The rod was stuck at a point where the trail turned left and diverged from the stream. About 20 meters along the way, the trail disappeared into a deep forest.

“I think I got it,” said Seron.

“It is surrender,” Meg sighed.

“All right, I’ll explain. Think about it from the perspective of someone who’s walking from the forest, towards us. And imagine it’s raining or snowing really hard, hindering visibility. What would happen if the person missed the turn and kept going straight ahead?”

“Ah!” Meg’s eyes widened. “He would sink! The river is very low. In the winter, his life may be in danger!”

“Exactly. The rod is like a sign saying that there’s a stream ahead. The park staff probably hang a flag or a lantern from the rod when the weather calls for it.”

Seron reached out and grabbed the rod.

The rod had not been secured to the cylinder, likely to make it easier to retrieve. Seron pulled out the rod slightly and put it back again.

“I understand. How interesting.”

“Yeah. I don’t think anyone’s gonna need it in today’s weather, though.”

“Of course. But I am certain that with this, I can have very much fun,” Meg chuckled.

Seron and Larry did not understand, but Meg continued.

“Let us go!”

They resumed walking.

Larry’s team continued down the trail and entered the woods.

Only one turn later, they found themselves deep in the forest with neither the stream nor the plaza in sight. The chirping of birds punctuated the ambience.

"If now I cover my eyes and spin around and around," Meg said, "I will probably not know where I have to go to find the plaza."

"No worries. That's what the map and the compass are for," Larry said. He was holding the map in his left hand.

The edge closest to Larry had been rolled up, and the opposite edge was hanging from his hand. Larry had been keeping his thumb on their current position since departing the starting line, slowly making progress.

He also made certain to correct his bearings in line with the terrain around them.

Whenever they made a turn, he rotated the map accordingly. He also checked the compass in his right hand on occasion to check that he was going the right way. Larry paid special attention to places where their route split.

He made it all look easy.

"You're incredible, Larry," Seron said.

"Thanks, man. I've been doing this stuff for a while, y'know. —We're gonna go straight down this way for a bit. There won't be any forks until we see a stream to our right, so I'm gonna put away the map. Gotta take it easy when you can."

Larry put the compass in Seron's rucksack and carefully rolled up the map in his left hand. Then he checked the time.

Instead of wooden planks, the trail was paved with wood chips. The ground was soft and easy to walk on. Larry, Seron, and Meg walked side-by-side.

Ahead, they spotted other students.

"Where are we?"

"Hm...I remember we made a right turn, and..."

"You sure it wasn't a left? This is the starting line, so we turned left and ended up here!"

Three junior-classmen, a trio of girls, were debating their position with the map between them. None of them sounded the least bit anxious.

"This is the way away from the entrance! We'll know once we get to the checkpoint. C'mon!" one of the girls said just as Larry's team passed by. The girls all rose to their feet and headed in the direction of the entrance.

"...That way seems like the opposite way. Am I remembering wrongly?" Meg asked, glancing back.

"Yeah, but it's all right. As long as they're having fun," Larry said with a chuckle, "It's just a game. Even getting lost in the woods will be a good memory to them. Not even the school considers this a real competition, I bet."

"Do you really think so?" Meg wondered. Larry was about to respond, but stopped himself and gestured to Seron instead.

"Yeah. I think today's more of a chance for city kids to get a taste of nature. Most people probably think getting first place here's just a nice bonus. People aiming for the top like us are the exceptions."

"Right," Larry nodded.

"I see. I understand."

"Let's just hope we're the only weirdos who think of this as a competition," Seron said with a smile.

“Yeah,” Larry agreed.

Meg also put on a smile in response. “Yes! It certainly is a lovely place. It is the perfect weather for walking!”

“I wish we could do this every month,” Seron whispered to himself.

* * *

Seron, Meg, and Larry continued briskly down the the trail, encountering other students on occasion.

They had stopped speaking some time ago, but neither Seron nor Meg tried to break the silence.

So Larry was forced to do it himself.

“By the way, about Jenny.”

“Yeah?” “Yes?” Seron and Meg responded, slightly surprised.

Larry hesitated, but decided to speak. “I guess it couldn’t hurt,” he mumbled. “I think she had another reason for putting you in our team, Megmica. She kind of let it slip during midterm season when we had a chance to talk.”

“Oh?” “What is the reason?”

“She says she wants to dig up Lia and Nick’s secrets.”

“Pardon? Their secrets?”

“What does that mean, Larry?”

“Basically,” Larry said, “she’s never really spent a lot of time alone with those two.”

“Now that you say it, that is true.” “Yeah.” Meg and Seron nodded.

“She says, and I quote, ‘The nose knows! Nat and Nick are hiding some juicy secrets.’”

“Hm...Natalia is very good at playing any instrument. She can play a piano and a flute.”

“Nick is a monster with the staff, though you couldn’t tell from the way he usually acts.”

Meg and Seron each gave suggestions.

“Yeah. Nick really surprised me with how good he was,” Larry said, “I think that’s what got Jenfie started. She’s probably assuming they have more secrets to spill or something,” he sighed, not even trying to hide his disbelief.

“I understand,” Said Meg, “so that is why I was placed in here and those three people became the same team.”

Larry nodded. “I would have done the same in her shoes. It was either you or Nick on this team. But she probably put you here because she wants to dig up Lia and Nick’s secrets. I bet her team’s not even bothering with the checkpoints. They’re probably sitting around snacking on a bench somewhere, with Jenny grilling the others.”

“I see...” Meg trailed off, but she continued, “But! But, Natalia is the same inside and outside, and she does not have one thing to hide. She came to visit at my house, and she was the same when we two were alone.”

Larry nodded firmly. “Yeah. Lia’s been that way all her life. She was born with that crazy personality. Which is what I told Jenny, but...”

Seron chimed in. “Nick, too. The only thing you’d call a secret is his skill and experience with the staff—it’s a surprising secret, but not a particularly deep one.”

“Yeah. It was definitely a shock, though,” Larry agreed.

“Yes, it was,” Meg did as well. Seron continued.

“His vocabulary, his feminine looks—that’s just who he is. That’s the impression I got taking classes with him, and my impression hasn’t changed since.”

“Yeah,” Larry added, “I think those two know themselves really well, and know what they want. They’re completely sure of themselves.”

“Oh! That is a very cool Roxchean phrase, Larry. You want to say that where a person is now is important, I see,” Meg exclaimed.

“Huh? Oh. Thanks,” Larry said, casting Seron a glance.

“Yeah. That’s about all with Nat and Nick,” Seron said, not a hint of jealousy in sight.

Larry breathed a sigh of relief and continued. “I’m more curious about why Jenny’s so convinced they’re hiding things. She’s probably wasting her breath right about now, trying to get them to spill their nonexistent secrets.”

“I see...in a Roxchean expression, Jenny is barking up the wrong tree,” Meg noted.

“If only that were all...” “Yeah.”

“Hm?” Meg intoned. “What does this mean?”

Seron replied, “It means she might end up a mummified grave robber.”

“A mummified...? Do you mean the mummies? Jenny will become a mummy, you mean? She will dry and die? That is terrible! We must save her quickly!” Meg panicked, but Seron calmed her down.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a figure of speech. There’s an old story about how a grave robber broke into a tomb to find the medicine the mummy was buried with, but he died in the tomb and became a mummy himself. It’s when you try to make someone else do something, only to end up doing it yourself. So...”

Larry picked up where Seron left off. “Jenny’s gonna try to dig up their nonexistent secrets, but they’ll turn it around and—”

“And Jenny will tell her secrets to them without her thinking?”

“More or less,” Larry replied.

“Yeah. It seems to me like *Jenny*’s the one trying to hide something. That’s generally how it goes. The more secrets you have, the more of an appetite you have for other people’s secrets,” Seron said.

“Oh! That Roxchean expression is very cool too, Seron.”

Seron lost himself in expressionless bliss, and Larry breathed a sigh of relief at the sight.

“Then,” Meg continued, “To example, Jenny can tell the secret of the princess photograph she showed to us during the summer camp?” Her eyes began to twinkle. “Wh-what will happen?”

Meg seemed to feel a mix of pity and excitement, mostly the latter.

“I wonder...” “I wonder...” the boys replied, trying not to let their curiosity show too much.

“Oh? You do not wish to know, Seron and Larry? Jenny’s secret,” Meg asked, as though having read their mind.

“Look, a pond.” “Look, a pond.”

* * *

As the students wandered in search of the next checkpoint, three in their midst went against the flow.

“Nice weather. Food’s great whenever, but today’s perfect for snacking.”

“It certainly is lovely. I do not feel sleepy at all, but today is perfect for a long nap in the sun.”

“Yeah. I’m not much of a nature photographer, but it’s perfect for taking snapshots.”

Natalia, Jenny, and Nick sat on a bench by a marsh not too far from the starting line.

The peaceful water reflected the clear blue sky, with leaves poking out of the surface and delicate ripples left in the wake of passing waterfowl.

“I suppose the others must be braving uncharted terrain as we speak,” Nick remarked, looking up at the sky.

“I’mma put Larry on tea duty if he screws up this one,” Natalia snickered, putting a large piece of chocolate in her mouth.

“I believe he is already fulfilling that function,” Nick pointed out, but Natalia pretended to not have known.

“By the way, you two—or, maybe just Nat this time,” Jenny said, turning.

“What’s up? If you wanna know how to get taller, all I can tell you is to not be a picky eater.”

“No, no. I was actually curious about Larry.”

“Oh?” Natalia grinned, pleasantly surprised. “So what kinda dirt you want? I can tell you anything! We’ve got plenty of time.”

“Thanks,” Jenny replied brusquely, then grinned to herself.

Natalia also grinned, but did not let Jenny see.

“All right, so how long’ve you known him?”

“What was it now...I must’ve been five or something, so something like 10 years. My family moved into the empty place next to the Hepburns.”

“I see.”

“My folks sold the house when I was in fourth year at primary school saying we didn’t need such a big house since they were away at concerts all the time. I liked the old place. There was this big gingko tree that turned bright yellow in autumn. It kinda stank this time of year, but I didn’t mind,” Natalia reminisced.

Pleased with the flow of information, Jenny moved on to the next question. “What was he like back then? I get you were childhood friends, but what did you do together? I can’t really picture anything.”

“What did we do? We did kid stuff. Fooled around without being too conscious about playing with a boy. I think we were close. Oh, and he used to be a big crybaby.”

“I see, I see. So how’d you make him cry?”

“Was it that obvious? Well, I did a lot of stuff.”

“Like?”

“A lot of stuff. I’m sure you can think of something, right? You must’ve made a lot of boys cry yourself when you were in second year of primary school or so. What were your

favorite strategies?" Natalia asked. Nick, meanwhile, was giving a smile and a wave to a passing girl.

And even after the girl disappeared, the smile did not fade. Nick listened discreetly, focusing his senses on the conversation to his left.

"Me? I wouldn't know. I didn't talk with boys at that age," Jenny replied.

"Huh? You missed out, chief. Making boys cry is a girl's privilege in primary school."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh. So did they make you cry instead? That's surprising." Natalia raised an eyebrow. Jenny had no choice but to answer.

"No. There just weren't any boys in my school."

"Huh? I thought most primary schools were co-ed. Did you go to a religious school, chief?" Natalia gasped, waving her hands dramatically.

"No."

"Then where'd you go? Or don't tell me...you couldn't afford to go, could you! I'm so sorry, chief...your family was broke, wasn't it? You couldn't pay the tuition...I'm sorry," Natalia apologized with a straight face to the heiress to Roxche's largest car company.

"Obviously, no," Jenny sighed, "I did go to primary school."

"Where?"

"Halsey Women's University Primary School."

Halsey was the most famous private women's university in Roxche, also infamous for its difficult admissions requirements.

"Whoa! That's a real fancy lady school!" Natalia exclaimed, her shock for once genuine. She leaned in close to Jenny as though zooming. "You serious, chief?"

Jenny nodded almost imperceptibly. Nick joined the conversation from her right.

"Then why not continue on to Halsey Women's University Secondary School? As I recall, Halsey's affiliated institutions range from kindergarten to university."

Nick had a point. "Yeah, but..." Jenny trailed off.

Natalia and Nick saw a rare shadow of doubt in Jenny's eyes and decided to refrain from prying for all of zero milliseconds. They leapt like predators locked on to their prey.

"What a waste! You beat the odds and made it into that fancy primary school, and you could have gone all the way to their exclusive secondary school too. Ours isn't bad, but I'd have stayed if I were you."

"I must agree," Nick joined in with support fire, "but I suppose people all have their reasons, as you must have had, Jenny. And thanks to your decision, we met and befriended you, do club activities together, and even share our pasts with one another."

Specifically, Jenny was the only one sharing her past, but Natalia caught Nick's pass and continued their team effort.

"Yeah! You could even call this destiny, chief. We were fated to meet! I bet you must be happy to do club stuff with us and publish newspapers—er, *a* newspaper with us, eh?"

"Personally, I am overjoyed!" Nick exclaimed, "The best thing about secondary school is that academics are far from all it has to offer, do you not agree?"

"Exactly, Nick. Exactly. Don't you think so too, chief?"

Natalia and Nick were on a roll. Jenny was being dragged along.

“Er...well...”

“Chief! That’s all the more reason why you should tell us what brought you here! Oh, but I guess it’s not fair if you’re the only one talking. Then we’ll all share. I’ll go first,” Natalia rambled without giving Jenny a chance to speak. She was enjoying herself immensely. “The truth is...I applied to this school because...”

A spark of excitement rose to Jenny’s eye. She prepared for the moment Natalia began to pour out her heart.

“...Because it was closest to my house. Ten minutes on foot.”

“Oh.”

Jenny deflated instantly.

Her explanation finished, Natalia cast a glance over Jenny’s head to her right.

“All right. You, Nick?”

“In my case, I live at about the halfway point between our school and the 3rd Capital Secondary School. In fact, the latter may technically be closer to my residence.”

“So what made you pick our school?”

“I wanted to avoid the 3rd Capital Secondary School, as my sisters had been attending at the time.”

“Interesting...so is there something between you and them that made you avoid their school?” Jenny probed, sensing hints of a secret with Nick’s sisters.

“Not at all. My sisters are both lovely and admirable. I simply thought it would be more interesting to attend a different school.”

“Oh.”

Again, Jenny deflated.

“You, chief?”

“Huh? No reason.”

“Really?” “Truly?” Natalia and Nick asked at the same time.

“It wasn’t anything big.”

“Oh? Then tell us.”

“I said it’s nothing big.”

“I’d love to know why you went from the best girls’ school in Roxche to a normal secondary school even if there’s no big juicy piece of gossip behind it. C’mon, chief.”

“Well...it was...”

“It was?”

“It was just for a change of pace,” Jenny spat.

“I see, I see,” Natalia said, nodding repeatedly. She put her right arm on Jenny’s shoulder. “I think I get the picture.”

“Yeah? Good to hear,” Jenny said, looking slightly relieved under Natalia’s arm. But,

“Yeah. It’s definitely more fun having some guys around. You could even get a boyfriend!”

Angry creases formed on Jenny’s brow. “Hey! Where’d that come from?!”

“Oh? Was I wrong?”

“Yeah!”

“But what else could it be? The only difference between a girls’ school and a co-ed is the stink of men.”

Nick chuckled bitterly at the comment, but Natalia continued.

“As a fellow girl, I can see how having boys around could make things fun. Mhm.”

“Hmph!” Jenny snorted, shaking Natalia’s arm off her shoulder. “I said that wasn’t the reason! I applied to a co-ed school because there’s boys around, but not because I wanted to get a boyfriend!”

“Then you don’t want one?”

“No! I’m not gonna date anybody!”

“Aww, but you’re wasting your youth. Are you gonna start dating in university?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“If you want to find a decent man, you gotta start early. Don’t you think?”

“That doesn’t mean I *have* to get a boyfriend.”

“But—”

The girl talk continued without giving Nick a chance to intervene.

“Fascinating.”

But he did not seem to mind, looking up at the sky with an elegant smile.

* * *

Larry was in the woods.

Cedars as thick as grown men stood in orderly rows, their branches overlapping and obscuring his line of sight.

Larry stood with the compass in his right hand open and held at eye-level. He peered through the lens in the lid to find his next heading.

When he found the angle the compass indicated, he pinpointed a tree that happened to overlap with the wire fitted into the lid.

Larry shut the compass and began to walk, striding across the grass. He took one firm step after another, never once breaking into a run.

Seron and Meg followed about 10 meters behind.

“He’s checking our heading by using nearby features as landmarks, since we can’t see too far in here,” Seron explained, “In this case, Larry’s picked that tree as the landmark. He’ll try to keep walking without losing sight of it. Once we get there he’ll check the compass again and find us the next landmark.”

“If he does do this, we can walk straightly in the forest. I understand. It is very wise,” Meg said with a nod. Then she added, “But it is very bad news if he chooses the wrong direction.”

“Yeah,” Seron replied.

The team had already cleared two checkpoints and left the trail again, taking the fastest route towards the next checkpoint.

This route forced them through the woods all the way to their next destination. There were no hills or streams marked, but the next checkpoint was hundreds of meters away.

If they failed to continue in a straight line, even when they returned to the trail they would not know whether to head left or right. They would be completely lost.

Larry stopped and looked at the compass again. Seron and Meg stopped as well.

“So he’s using a really clever strategy to make sure we’ll be all right,” Seron whispered, so as to not disturb Larry.

“Oh? What is the strategy?”

Larry began to walk again. Seron and Meg followed.

“Right now, we’re not actually walking straight to the next checkpoint,” Seron explained, “Because if we were, and we happened to get lost, we wouldn’t know if we’d strayed too far to the left or the right. Does that make sense so far?”

“Yes, it does.”

“So Larry’s leading us to a point on the trail about 200 meters to the left of the checkpoint. Which means—”

Meg clapped her hands triumphantly, as though she had solved a riddle. “I understand! When we come to the trail, we will not wander. We will turn right! Even if our direction is a little wrong, it will not be severely wrong.”

“Yeah. Exactly,” Seron replied, his gaze locked on Meg’s smile.

“Knowing more and more makes it more and more fun!”

“I’m glad to hear that. I once read a book that said women can’t conceptualize maps very well, but I guess it must have been wrong.”

“The good thing about you, Seron, is that you are smart but you never think your knowledge is always right!”

“Th-thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. Thank you for explaining this to me.”

They stopped, facing one another—

“Huh?! WHOA!” Larry cried.

Seron and Meg also looked ahead.

“Hm?” “Oh my!”

They spotted another group of students.



* * *

“Your parents’d be happier if you brought home your future husband sooner than later,” Natalia remarked, crossing her legs.

“Sure, I guess.”

Jenny sat next to her, sitting cross-legged.

Next to Jenny sat Nick, quietly sipping orange juice without joining the conversation.

“Right? Better grab one early. Gotta find Mr. Right and put your name on him before anyone else does. Or else you’ll end up an old maid before you know it.”

Just as Natalia insinuated, most women in Roxche married in their early twenties. It was the same for the upper classes, who went from secondary school to university, and for the working classes, who went into the workforce.

Many students would begin dating in secondary school, populated by others of similar backgrounds, and marry while in university or upon graduation. It was not uncommon to marry as soon as one entered university, either.

Because it was very likely that one would go on to marry a boyfriend or girlfriend from secondary school, the school hosted a dance party every year in the fourth month to give students an opportunity to socialize and find their match.

“Your parents would’ve set up someone for you if you’d stayed in the girls’ school. Isn’t that why you came here?” Natalia asked, “That’s the only thing my music-focused brain can come up with.”

“Does it even matter?” Jenny replied, trying to avoid the issue.

“Yeah. You’re the only one who hasn’t talked. C’mon, I keep secrets. Not Larry’s, though. In second year of primary school he tried to show off on the horizontal bars and fell off. His nosebleed was so bad his gym uniform turned bright red. I’ve got plenty more secrets to share, if you wanna trade for it.”

“Why are you doing this?” Jenny demanded, looking up at Natalia.

“Why else? I wanna get to know you more and be better friends with you,” Natalia replied. Jenny smirked.

“All right. I guess it’s true I wanted a freer life here. Girls’ schools are a lot more restrictive.”

“See? It’s good to be free. So what happened to bring you to a co-ed school? Did something happen to you when you were 12 years old?”

“Yeah, stuff.”

“Like?”

“Just stuff.”

“You gotta tell us what this stuff is, Jenny. I get the feeling it’s something really surprising. C’mon, tell us. I promise I’ll go, ‘Oh my goodness!’ every once in a while.”

* * *

“Oh my goodness!” Meg exclaimed. She understood what was happening the moment she spotted the other students. “Other people are doing the same thing other than us!”

About 50 meters in the distance were three people in school-issue tracksuits.

The tallest of the group was a boy with brown hair. He was accompanied by a bespectacled boy with auburn hair, and a girl with black hair a little longer than Jenny’s. From their builds they were likely all senior-classmen.

The tall boy at the front was holding a compass much like Larry’s.

All three students wore sturdy boots, and rucksacks about twice the size of Larry’s. They could probably use the rucksacks to go on an extended camping trip. They sagged with weight, clearly stuffed full of heavy objects.

The students in the distance were also holding sturdy oaken walking sticks, one in each hand. Each stick was stuck several centimeters into the ground.

The team in the distance spotted Larry’s team, and stopped in surprise.

“Huh. I’ve never seen that guy in any of my military sciences classes. They don’t give navigation training in any other courses or clubs, though...” Larry whispered.

“They’re serious about this competition too,” Seron remarked.

“Yeah.” Larry nodded. “Three hundred and fifty, Seron.”

“Got it.”

Meg tilted her head. Seron answered the unspoken question.

“That’s the distance we’ve covered since the last checkpoint. Larry’s been keeping track with his strides. He told me because it’s better to have more people remember.”

“I understand. Three hundred and fifty meters. I have memorized this too.”

The other team came to a stop when they were close enough to hold a conversation.

“Hey there! How’s it going?” the tall boy asked Larry with an affable smile.

“Good morning. We’re enjoying ourselves,” Larry replied, also coming to a stop.

The name ‘Wilkinson’ was embroidered onto the tall boy’s jacket.

“I’m surprised we weren’t the only team playing to win,” Wilkinson admitted, “I guess you probably thought the same, huh. We’re from the ski club! I’m Wilkinson, the club president.”

“I see. No wonder he could navigate. It completely slipped my mind,” Larry whispered bitterly.

“Why was it so?” Meg asked quietly.

“There’s a variation on orienteering called ski-orienteering. It’s basically the same as the regular game, except with skis. They’re using ski poles to make it easier to walk.”

Meg and Seron nodded.

“That’s right,” Wilkinson said, “I expected no less from a Hepburn. I remember seeing your brother at school a few years back.”

“Thank you, SC Wilkinson,” Larry replied, glad that he did not have to take the extra time to introduce himself.

“By the way, I didn’t know there was a military sciences club at school,” Wilkinson mused curiously.

“Actually, we’re from the newspaper club,” Larry replied.

Wilkinson let go of his pole and put a thoughtful hand on his chin. "Ah. I heard the newspaper club found a supervisor and received official status recently."

"Yes. I'm surprised you knew."

"But you don't seem to have a lot of members yet."

"Yes. I'm surprised you knew."

"So you're planning to win this competition and make your name known to the entire school."

"Yes. I...I'm surprised you know all that, SC Wilkinson."

"Of course! How could I not?" Wilkinson declared proudly, to Larry, Seron, and Meg's confusion. "Because that's what we're doing!"

"Ah, I see." "Hm. "I understand."

"The ski club's been around since the school was founded, and at one point we were so popular we had to limit applications. But now we're down to only 16 students!"

"It's still a lot more than our six," Larry pointed out, trying to cheer up Wilkinson. But—

"And we're the only active members."

"Oh. That's a bit of a downer. I can see why you're having a hard time."

"And us three are all in sixth year. What do you think will happen after we graduate in a few months?"

"I'm not sure," Larry lied, the obvious answer being that the club would cease to exist.

"That's why we're going to win and make sure the whole school knows about the ski club and its long history!"

"I see."

"So you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Pardon me?"

"We're aiming for the top! You guys have guts, I admit, but you can't beat us! Give up and enjoy your picnic. That's all I have to say! Bye!" Wilkinson finished, and the ski club sped off.

They walked briskly into the distance with Wilkinson in the lead, poles piercing the ground as they went in a straight line slightly out of line with Larry's heading.

Soon, they disappeared completely.

For some time, Larry and the others stared without a word.

"Hm...this is gonna be tough. We can't beat 'em for speed and endurance," Larry groaned.

"The powerful rivals appeared. We might not be able to win," Meg sighed.

But Seron alone seemed undaunted.

"You never know unless you try. We'll keep going at our own pace, Larry."

* * *

Just as Larry's team resumed—

"C'mon, please? Chief."

"Stop clinging. You're acting like a drunk, you know that?"

Natalia was entangling herself with Jenny, who successfully pushed her away in spite of their size difference.

“It’s nothing interesting.”

“But I wanna know! Please, Jenny!”

“Like I said...”

“Me and Nicholas already told you our stories! You have to tell us yours!”

“I said—”

“You can admit you wanted to meet some boys, chief! I just want to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth!”

“I told you that’s not it! It’s more complicated.”

“Oh? How so?”

“It’s nothing interesting.”

“In what way?”

“Every way.”

“Oh? How so?”

Listening to the conversation to his left, Nick peered through the small binoculars he had brought.

“Ah, a mallard. Looks scrumptious.”

* * *

Larry’s team left the woods and made it onto the trail.

A trio of girls screamed when the team seemingly materialized out of nowhere, but Larry turned right without a moment’s hesitation. Seron and Meg followed.

With the map in his left hand, Larry put his thumb on the spot he supposed was their current location. He checked their coordinates against the bend in the trail and the compass.

“We’re on the right track.”

A short walk past the bend later, they spotted the checkpoint.

“There!”

It all went according to Larry’s plan.

There was a table at the checkpoint with a staff member sitting behind it.

A flag was set up at the checkpoint, adorned with a stylized rabbit to show that the checkpoint was for those on the rabbit course. It was numbered ‘4’.

Three teams—nine students—were gathered at the checkpoint.

“You’re amazing, Larry,” Seron said.

“Oh! It is the people from before!” Meg cried.

Wilkinson and the ski club members were already at the checkpoint, scrutinizing a piece of paper together. Their large rucksacks and poles were on the ground beside them.

“So they’re on this course too. But they’re taking a different route...” Larry sighed. He feared that the ski club had found a more efficient route than his.

“Don’t worry about them,” Seron reassured him with a pat on the shoulder. “We’ve still got a chance. My guess was right.”

“What do you mean?” “What do you mean?” Larry and Meg asked in unison.

“Look.”

The ski club members were still staring a hole into their paper. The girl crouched down and took out a book from one of the rucksacks—a thick encyclopedia. They began to rifle through the pages.

“Ah!”

The ski club noticed Larry’s team draw near. They ground their teeth and quickly returned to their encyclopedia.

“What in the world has happened?” asked Meg. Seron answered by flashing their answer sheet—marked with the name of their course—to the checkpoint staff and receiving the question sheet.

The question sheet contained this checkpoint’s quiz. Students had to write down their answers at the checkpoint, and their answers would be graded after they crossed the finish line. Wrong answers resulted in massive penalties, so getting a perfect score on the quiz was absolutely essential to victory.

Seron showed the question sheet to Larry and Meg.

Quiz (Social Sciences)

Which of the below is NOT a reason that the Roxcheanuk Confederation’s Special Capital District was chosen to be built where it is today?

1. Because it was far from the Lutoni River (the border between East and West).
2. Because it was far from the coast and transportation by sea was easier than by canal.
3. Because of its temperate climate and low snowfall.
4. Because the area’s canal and rail infrastructure was well-developed.
5. Because it was on the borders of multiple countries, allowing it to be a region independent of any Roxchean member state.

Seron received a colored pencil from the staff member. Each checkpoint had a differently-colored pencil to prevent cheating.

Seron wrote ‘4’ on their answer sheet and returned the colored pencil. Then, unusually for him, he slapped Larry on the back and raised his voice.

“All right, we’re off to the next checkpoint! Lead the way, Larry!”

“Agh!” The ski team shot Seron a murderous glare, but they quickly returned to their encyclopedia.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Larry asked.

“Can they not solve their question well?” Meg wondered.

“They wouldn’t have brought the encyclopedias if they could,” Seron concluded.

Larry followed the crayon-marked route he had plotted on the map and began to walk. “You think they really brought a whole encyclopedia set with them? That’s pretty stupid.”

“They’re trying to make up for their weaknesses in any way they can. I don’t think it’s such a stupid idea. Although now we don’t have a massive advantage over them.”

“You’re right. —Sorry, ski club. I’m sure you didn’t need an idiot like me to call you stupid. Do your best,” Larry apologized quietly, as the ski club anxiously watched them depart.

“I understand. That was your plan, Seron! Endurance and speed, the ski team has it, but our team has you, who loves books!” Meg cheered.

Seron nodded. “Yeah. It’s gonna be a close one.”

About five minutes after Larry’s team had left—

“Ah! Railroads didn’t exist when the Capital District was founded!” Wilkinson exclaimed, his voice resounding across the checkpoint.

“Four, huh.” “Four.”

The other teams learned the answer as well.

* * *

“It’s nothing interesting.”

“Really?”

Jenny and Natalia’s back-and-forth showed no sign of ending.

“Yes, really.”

“I just don’t get how our clever, intelligent chief would make a life-changing decision for no reason whatsoever.”

“Thanks for the compliments, but I’m just gonna ignore the rest of that.”

“Aw, don’t be like that, chief. Hey, are you feeling thirsty at all? Here. It’s on me,” Natalia said, offering a bottle from her own lunchbox. It was grape juice.

“Thanks.”

Jenny took the bottle, opened the lid, and downed half its contents in one go.

“Not bad. You a heavy drinker?”

“This is *juice*,” Jenny sighed, but she seemed to recall something and giggled. “But a friend of mine once accidentally got drunk on wine.”

“Oh? How did that happen?”

“She found some freshly-made wine but thought it was juice. Downed an entire glass and got knocked out. Heh.”

“Yeah, the fresh stuff’s easy to drink, though I’ve never tried myself. So the grape juice brought back that memory, eh chief? How do you feel? Tingly? Tipsy at all?”

“No. But—”

“But?”

“I guess it’s not something I need to be drunk to talk about...since it turned out all right, I guess.”

“What are you saying, chief?”

“And it’s not something I need to hide until I’m old enough to actually drink...”

“Huh?”

Natalia gazed into Jenny’s profiled face, completely lost.

Jenny looked up. Their eyes met.

Natalia spotted the glint of amusement and abandon in Jenny’s gaze.

“So now you’re ready to talk! C’mon, it’s time to expose your secret!” Natalia declared dramatically.

Jenny grinned. "Like I said, it's nothing interesting. Prepare for the disappointment of your life."

And Nick, who had been silent as a stone for some time, finally spoke up with an elegant smile. "I am quite curious as well."

* * *

"Not bad, newspaper club! I admit we underestimated you, but we are *not* going to lose! I swear!"

Wilkinson and the ski club rushed past Larry's team at a brisk pace. Their poled drummed against the wooden plank walkway.

The ski team members were sweating heavily, their bags heaving.

"They're trying so hard," Larry remarked without shedding a drop of sweat. He glanced at the map and his watch. "We're almost there."

"To the fifth checkpoint, yes? That is that, and now we are finally overtaken. It is truly a very good challenge," said Meg, her eyes brimming with spirit.

Since the third checkpoint, they had left the trails several times and crossed the uncultivated woods. The team beat the ski club to the fourth checkpoint.

Seron solved the question with ease, and immediately the team started again, crossing the woods again and following the trail to the fifth checkpoint.

The ski club passed them just before they reached the fifth checkpoint, which was visible just ahead. The rabbit flag was displayed clearly next to it.

Wilkinson and the others were already there, desperately flipping through pages of their encyclopedia to find the answer. At times they wiped the sweat off their brows with their sleeves.

Seron received the question sheet and took four seconds to read through it.

Then he showed it to Meg.

"Hm?" Meg read the question and smiled radiantly. "It is this one! I am certain! It was very easy!" she cried, pointing out the answer immediately. Seron nodded firmly.

"I think so too!" he made a point of declaring loudly, and wrote their answer and showed it to the staff member at the checkpoint.

"Urgh..." "Dammit..." "Hmm..."

The ski club's anger was palpable.

"All right! On to the final checkpoint!" Larry cried, doing his utmost to rattle the ski club.

"Yes! Heave-ho!" Meg showed no mercy as well.

Larry's team set off again.

"Urgh...damn that girl..." The lone girl on the ski club ground her teeth, watching the newspaper club depart. Her teeth were about to crack.

"Calm down. We're not out of the running yet," Wilkinson said coolly. "They're probably taking the same route as us. And remember, the last checkpoint is far from the finish line. They can't beat us in endurance, right?"

"Prez..."

“So we have to calm down and make sure we get these answers right. ‘What is the full name of the Sou Be-II soldier who stumbled upon the historic mural that ended the war between East and West in 3287?’ I think it’s number 2, ‘Carr Benjamin’.”

“Me too!” “Yes!”

Wilkinson nodded firmly. And—

“But let’s look it up, just in case!”

* * *

“I was raised like a real lady. Sheltered and spoiled like a little princess. I didn’t think it was weird, though. I liked being treated that way,” Jenny Jones began, bottle of grape juice in one hand and her legs crossed, her shoes on the ground.

“Nobody at this school’d believe you. But I do, cause I saw that photo,” said Natalia.

The photo Natalia was referring to depicted Jenny at the age of 12, dressed up like a doll in a fancy winter coat.

“Indeed,” Nick agreed.

“Then you wouldn’t have believed me if you hadn’t seen it?”

“Nuh-uh.” “Likely not.”

Jenny puffed up her cheeks. “So it really was that shocking.”

“I prefer you now, chief,” Natalia commented. Jenny turned.

“Heh. You’re just saying that.”

“Nah, I’m kind of being honest. You look better now.”

“Thanks. I didn’t mind the long hair and the fancy outfits, though. My parents were strict but nice, and the servants and the maids and everyone around me was good to me. They were all such good people,” Jenny said, looking up at the sky, “and they still are.”

Then she looked down.

“I know,” Natalia reassured her. “So why the haircut?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Jenny retorted immediately.

Natalia and Nick looked at her.

Two sets of eyes fell on Jenny. She looked around, meeting their eyes one after another. “What? You look like you’ve just seen an extraterrestrial or something.”

“Chief...” Natalia trailed off in a half-sob. “It must have been so hard on you... It’s all right, you don’t have to force yourself to tell...”

Nick also put on a sad look. “I suppose we’ll be better off leaving this particular story untold.”

“Hey! You guys are the ones who wanted to hear this story!” Jenny laughed.

“Really? I guess we did.” “Indeed. I do recall, yes.”

“Ugh. I barely said anything back there. How’d you guess?”

“I was just lucky, I guess. So who was it?”

“My cousin,” Jenny replied immediately.

“Oho.” Natalia nodded. “Kinda surprising, but not really. If you were a sheltered heiress who went to an all-girls school, you’d probably never meet a guy who wasn’t a relative.”

“Yeah, more or less.”

“So how old was he?”

“Six years older than me, so he was 18 back then.”

“Hm. Yeah, he must’ve looked really cool and handsome.”

“Speaking from experience, Nat?”

“Nope. I don’t have relatives.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. My dad’s from a rich family, but they kicked him out when he said he wanted to become a musician. ‘Steinbeck’ is my mom’s family name. My mom lost her parents when she was young, so she had a tough time too. But my folks both got themselves state-funded scholarships to go to music school.”

“That sounds incredible,” said Nick.

“That’s my parents for you,” Natalia said with a shrug, “Afterwards, when they won a contest together and got really famous all throughout Roxche, my dad’s family sent him a snobby letter. ‘We will accept you back into our family. Be grateful and do everything in your power to bring prestige to the family name’.”

“And?”

“My dad wrote ‘em back. ‘Bullshit! Go kill yourselves! Don’t ever contact me again! Go to hell!’ in the most elegant Roxchean in the world. So that’s why I don’t have any grandparents or cousins.”

“Wow. I didn’t know any of that,” Jenny gasped.

“I confess I did know all this. I kept silent about it, of course,” said Nick.

“Anyway, I’m not torn up about not having relatives. But we were listening to the chief’s story. Sorry, Jenny. Keep going.”

“...Do I really have to spell it all out for you?” Jenny asked.

“Yeah.” Natalia nodded. “We wanna know what happened. Don’t worry, you have the right to speak.”

“You don’t mean ‘right to remain silent’?”

“Nope. To speak. Uninteresting stories don’t become ancient history until you tell them.”

* * *

“The answer is 2. That was the year the right to remain silent was officially recognized,” Seron said, filling in the answer sheet. All six boxes were now filled.

There were no other students at the checkpoint.

“All right! Now we just gotta get back to the starting line,” Larry cheered, glancing at his watch. It had been almost an hour since the competition began. “We’ll speed-walk all the way back. And we’re gonna stick to the trails this time so we don’t get lost.”

“I understand.” “Got it,” Meg and Seron replied.

Meg was holding a long, thin thermos. She poured a warm cup of tea for herself and drained it, then turned.

“Seron, please drink this tea. You must hydrate.”

“Huh? Oh, thank you.”

“I will pour the tea for you.”

Meg poured tea into the same cup and handed it to Seron.

Many thoughts went through his mind in that one instant.

“Could I have some too, please?” Larry asked, lending Seron a hand.

“I understand. Please drink first, Seron.”

Seron told himself over and over again that there was no special meaning to the cup, and drank the tea.

“It’s good.”

“Yes, because Larry is good in brewing tea.”

Seron returned the cup to Meg. Larry downed his tea in one go.

“Let’s get going,” he said, putting on his rucksack again with the thermos inside.

They started for the goal.

* * *

“I was just a delusional little girl. A girl who assumed that the guy who was always really really nice to her was in love with her—and ended up falling for him.”

“It could happen to anyone, chief. It’s not your fault.”

“Yeah. I didn’t do anything wrong. Except for being an idiot.”

“C’mon.”

“I was an idiot. Stupidly falling for him, stupidly making stupid assumptions, stupidly deluding myself, stupidly imagining those delusions would come true,” Jenny said, her face blank. Her eyes were not on her companions, but on the blue sky beyond the trees.

“When he broke the news, I felt like I was flung off to another planet. It happens in life. When everything still looks the same but you’re knocked away into another world.”

“Welcome, then. It’s not too bad here. They say ‘wherever you go, there you remain’. So what was the news?”

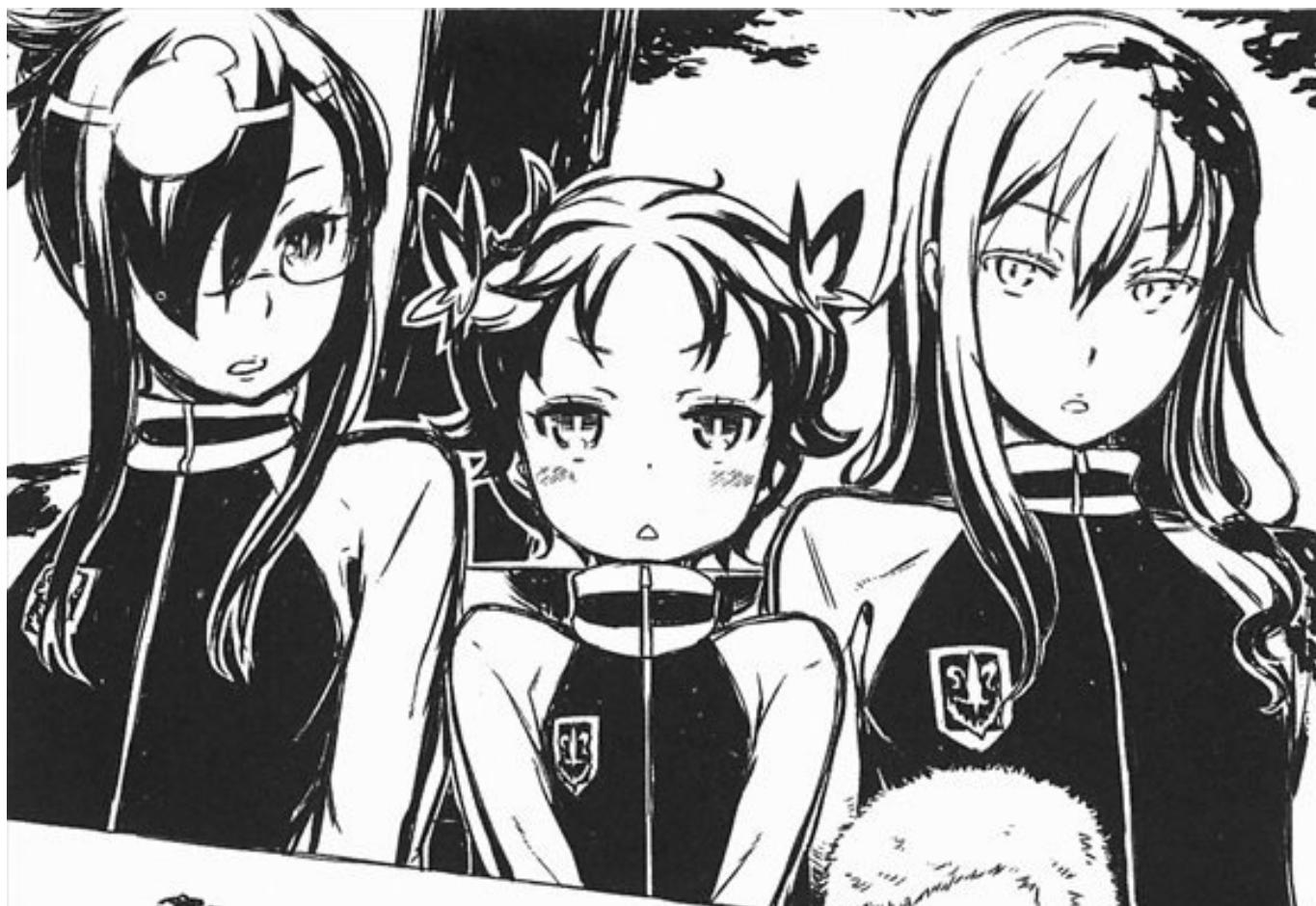
“Mundane stuff. Something for everyone to celebrate. He said he would marry this beautiful girl as soon as they started university.”

“Oh.”

“A beautiful girl he’d been seeing in secret for a long time.”

“Someone you knew?”

“Yeah,” Jenny said, and took a deep breath. “I may have been a sheltered little girl back then, but how could I not know my own sister?”



* * *

“Seron, Larry. The ski club is there,” Meg said, having spotted the three first.

About 40 meters ahead of Larry’s team, the ski club marched forward with their poles drumming against the trail. They were drenched in sweat.

“Must be on their way to the last checkpoint,” Larry remarked, checking his map and his watch. “It’s okay. Even if they solve it in three minutes, we’ll finish earlier.”

Even as Larry explained, the ski club came closer and closer. Larry moved out of the way so they could pass.

“Hey there, Hepburn! Very courteous of you!” Wilkinson grinned, face glistening.

“Thanks for your sportsmanship, but I don’t recommend letting your guard down!”

That was when the ski club stopped running. They looked at Larry’s team, walking slowly down the trail.

“The answer is 2, right?”

“How?!” “Oh my.”

Wilkinson grinned at Larry and Meg’s responses.

“There’s no rule that says we can’t get the answers from another team. That’s what the colored pencils are for. Thanks for the help!” Wilkinson said, smiling.

“Argh...” Larry ground his teeth.

“We’re gonna sprint all the way to the checkpoint, and then the finish line. You’d better secure an advantage while you still have the chance! Looking forward to the big showdown!”

Wilkinson and the ski club began to run again. They drew near, passed by, and disappeared.

Larry pouted and watched them depart.

“Looks like we’ll have to run,” Seron said coolly.

“It is not fun to not run! I will run!” Meg chimed in zealously, crossing her arms with a smile.

Larry grinned.

“All right, guys. Let’s give it our best to the finish line!”

They took off.

* * *

“You had a sister, chief?” Natalia wondered. Nick cut in.

“Odd, that. I’d heard that you were the only child of the president.”

Jenny turned, meeting Nick’s gaze for the first time in a while.

“Nicholas, are you a detective?”

“Of course not, Jenny. I’ve simply spent a great deal of time looking into the histories of prestigious families.”

“Planning to marry rich, eh?” Natalia joked.

But Nick nodded without missing a beat. "I am. The Browning family isn't particularly prestigious, after all."

"Whoa, seriously? ...FYI, forget the Steinbecks. All we've got are mountains of instruments and really good music skills."

"That's quite remarkable in and of itself." Nick shook his head. "All my family has are textbooks my parents have read and textbooks my parents have written."

"Anyway," Natalia said, bringing the conversation back to the rails, "What happened, chief? You mind telling us?"

"All right." Jenny nodded. "She's my sister, but we're not related."

* * *

Seron, Larry, and Meg were running.

They were not sprinting, but they were certainly not relaxed.

They rushed past other students they encountered on the trail, receiving the occasional odd look.

"Right!" Larry ordered, and the others turned as he directed.

Because Meg was a little slower, the boys matched her pace.

"How much are there left?" Meg asked. Her beautiful voice echoed through the woods, breathing still relaxed.

"We're only about halfway there," Larry replied.

"...Oh..." Seron began to slow.

* * *

"My parents had a really hard time conceiving. It was tough for them before I was born."

"I see. President Jones is quite a bit older than those of my parents' generation, as I recall," Nick remarked.

"You read business magazines every day or something?" asked Natalia.

"Yes, after my mother is finished with them."

"I see. Keep going, chief."

"So my parents decided to adopt. That was six years before I was born. They went to an orphanage in the Capital District and took in a girl who was abandoned at birth."

"So that was your sister?"

"Yeah. And then my mother got pregnant with me out of the blue."

"Then what happened?"

"My parents wanted to raise us as sisters, but my uncle—my dad's younger brother—really wanted to take her in as his daughter. He'd really wanted a daughter of his own."

"And then?"

"They had a bunch of family meetings, and in the end my sister was adopted by my uncle."

"Wow...shunted from one family to another. I feel kinda sorry for her."

“FYI, my uncle lives with us in the same manor. We always have dinner together, too. The only thing that changed, really, was her legal guardian.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, my uncle had a son. He was the same age as my sister.”

“No way...it was *him*?” Natalia gasped, for once looking anxious.

“Wanna take a breather?” Jenny grinned, finally taking the offensive.

* * *

“Want to take a break?”

Seron was the first to run out of breath.

Larry was still full of energy, and though she was sweating Meg did not look particularly tired.

Seron alone was slowing, his head beginning to loll and his breaths growing ragged.

He was starting to slow into a walk.

“No...I’m just a little out of breath...we can’t stop here...”

“All right. We’ll keep going,” Larry said, pulling off Seron’s rucksack. “You can do it, buddy!” he cheered, pulling the rucksack over his stomach.

“Yes! You can!” Meg also cheered. Seron’s pace picked up a little.

* * *

“You mean to say that the cousin you fancied was in love with his own adopted sister?” Nick asked for confirmation.

“Yeah,” Jenny replied as though nothing was wrong.

“Oh my goodness! Dearie me!” Natalia fussed, going out of her way to sound like a lady.

“Stop that!” Jenny snapped. “Anyway, back to the story. I grew up with my sister and my cousin. They were like real siblings to me. We had so much fun together.”

“And?” Natalia asked.

Jenny leaned back against the bench and looked into the sky.

“I don’t know when they fell for each other. But I did know that they were going to secondary school together. The 1st Capital Secondary School. My cousin picked the place because it’s famous for its rowing team. He really wanted to join.”

“And?”

“And there I was, going to my fancy little princess school, daydreaming all the time about my rose-tinted future. Waiting in my little tower for my knight in shining armor to come and sweep me off my feet. Wanna hear more?”

“Agh...” Natalia gasped. “CHIEF!”

“Ah!”

She pulled Jenny into a suffocating hug.

“Ack! Hey! Ow! I can’t breathe! Are you trying to strangle me?!”

“Dammit!” Natalia swore, ignoring Jenny’s complaints. Tears were welling in her eyes. “This kinda stuff gets me every time! I can’t listen to much more of this!”

“You’re the one who asked for it! Let go of me!”

“But I can’t take it back now! Oh, chief!”

“Enough! And look! This story has a happy ending!”

“Really? How?”

“Maybe if you’d let go of me, I could tell you!”

Natalia finally released Jenny.

“Almost saw my life flash before my eyes,” Jenny sighed, fixing her hair.

“The story does not seem to be headed in a happy direction,” Nick said.

“Well, surprise. My cousin and my sister were legally siblings, but they could get married if she was taken off the family register. But my cousin was still torn up about it. And one day, after mulling it over forever, he told the whole dinner table out of the blue. ‘I’m going to spend the rest of my life with the woman next to me!’ I was listening to it all from across the table.”

“And? And? What happened then?” Natalia asked, staring into Jenny’s profiled face.

“No one said anything for a while. But we could all tell he was serious. So guess what happened then.”

“Hm...” Natalia nodded. “Total chaos? Plates flying, blood and screaming?”

“The opposite.”

“Really?”

“My uncle started bawling his eyes out, and bowed his head. Then he said to my cousin, ‘Take good care of her! Make her happy!’”

“Whoa! I don’t know whether to be impressed or disturbed,” Natalia exclaimed.

“Indeed.” Nick nodded.

“Everyone was happy. Uncle and Auntie really love my sister, and it made them sad to even think about her getting married and leaving. My parents too. All the stupid rich families used to look down on her just because she was adopted. Uncle and Auntie didn’t want her to marry someone who wouldn’t treat her well. Mom and Dad were happy that their nephew wouldn’t end up getting taken advantage of by some shady girl. And it’s not really incest since they’re not blood relatives.”

“I guess you could think of it that way. And sometimes the family you marry into makes a bigger impact than the person you marry.”

“So the dinner turned into an impromptu celebration. They were laughing and cheering. Everyone must’ve been so happy. Except for me. I just sat there with a fake smile plastered on my face, totally thunderstruck. It was like I’d been transported to a bizarro-world.”

“...And then?”

“What else? Before I knew it, the date was set and the wedding bells were ringing. It was the biggest celebration in the Jones family’s history. Obviously I was there too. Wearing an expensive dress, watching them kiss from the best seat in the house. Watching everyone beaming.”

“...Chief...that’s enough now...don’t push yourself...”

“No, I will! I’ve got a few things to say! First off, I don’t resent my cousin one bit. And I don’t resent my sister, either. They might not know how I felt, but they still love me so much. They’re good people, and I love them as much as they love me.”

“That’s good!”

“And I don’t resent my parents, or my uncle and aunt. I’m glad I was born into the Jones family. If I could go back in time and choose, I’d still pick my own parents. But! If I did get a second chance, I wouldn’t just sit around and wait. I’d do everything I needed to do, and say everything I wanted to say. No matter the consequences.”

“Mhm. Mhm.” Natalia nodded again and again.

“I learned a lesson from my mistakes. If you’re in love, don’t just sit back and hope they’ll notice you. Just hoping for a future together isn’t going to make that future come true. You’re not gonna win unless you give it everything you’ve got! Figure out that future you want and run for it like your life depends on it!”

Then, Jenny stood.

With her head held high, she held up her right hand and pointed straight ahead—

“I’m talking to YOU! SERON MAXWELL!”

At the sweat-drenched Seron, who happened to be passing by.

“...Who, me?”

With that confused question, Seron passed by Jenny’s team.

“Ah, everyone! We are doing our best work!”

Meg passed by a second later, followed by—

“You guys are still here?! Good! Hold on to these, I’ll come back for ‘em after we’ve won! Feel free to snack on everything, Lia!”

Larry, who took a second to put down the two rucksacks in front of the bench.

Then he took off running again.

Larry’s team soon disappeared behind the trees.

“It almost seems as though they are being chased,” Nick noted with a smile.

“Hmph!” Jenny snorted, taking a seat. “They’d better run like there’s a pack of wolves at their heels. I expect nothing less than first place out of them.”

“Why’re they running so fast, though? No complaints here, but they even left their food.” Natalia wondered, pulling the two rucksacks into her arms.

Nick pointed an open palm at the direction Larry’s team had come from.

“Hm?” “Huh?”

Natalia and Jenny turned.

“We’re gonna win this!” “Aaaaaargh!” “Ski club! Ski club!”

Wilkinson and his team were running as though their lives depended on it.

The three sixth-years were exhausted from the long, heavy trek. Saliva dribbled from their mouths as they crashed past Jenny’s team.

“I see.” Natalia nodded.

“This might be a close one,” Nick said, “If they keep up this pace, this team is likely to catch up with Larry’s at the plaza entrance.”

“How do you know that?”

“Oh, a few simple calculations.”

Jenny leaned back on the bench. “I won’t accept second place.”

* * *

“I see the newspaper club! Tally ho!”

Wilkinson’s terrifying cry reached even Larry’s team, running about 50 meters ahead.

The woods were almost at an end. The trail turned right at the stream, running parallel to it until the bridge that led to the goal. There were about 200 meters left.

“What are we, foxes!?” Larry complained, speeding up.

“We are rabbits, not foxes!” Meg pointed out. She was still going strong enough to speak. But Seron, running in front of her, was nearly in tears.

“‘Tally ho’ is what a hunter says to his hounds when he spots a fox.”

“Oh my goodness.”

“Damn it! They’re gonna catch up to us!” Larry howled, looking back. They had just made a turn, so the ski club was out of sight. But Wilkinson’s voice was just as clear as before.

“Just you wait, newspaper club!”

Larry’s team finally emerged from the woods.

The trail turned right. The red-and-white rod from earlier came into view.

“Larry! Will we be faster to go if we cross the river?” Meg suddenly asked.

“Huh? Yeah, but—”

Larry thought for a moment. If they crossed the stream immediately, they simply had to run across a short stretch of grass to the finish line. It would be faster than following the trail and crossing the bridge.

“I don’t think we’ll make it, Megmica. The stream is too wide.”

With a running start, they could likely make it over the stream itself. But the banks of the stream were steep and wide, meaning that they would actually have to jump three meters to make it safely across.

“It is all right! Truthfully, I have done it before!” Meg said, passing Larry and Seron.

She reached the red-and-white rod and pulled it out with both hands. Then she took several steps back.

“Huh?” Seron stopped.

“What’re you doing?” Larry asked.

“Please watch! The way of life of a Sou Be-II person!” Meg cried, breaking into a run. She charged toward the stream with the rod in her hands.

Then she stuck the end of the rod into the center of the stream.

“Hyah!”

With a spirited cry, she clung to the rod and leapt.

“Ah!” “Whoa!”

Seron’s jaw dropped and Larry’s eyes turned to dinner plates as Meg drew an elegant arc over the stream.

“There.”

The rod crossed all the way to the other side, slowly falling. Still holding the rod, Meg landed on the grass past the slopes of the riverbank.

Then she let go and rolled on the ground, her tracksuit and pigtails getting covered in grass. Her hair came undone.

“Please be quick!”

Meg quickly rose to her feet and tipped the rod across the stream. Her long dark hair rippled across her back.

“Yeah!” Larry rushed to the bank and caught the rod. “I’m going first, Seron! Come after me, okay?”

Larry took hold of the rod, took several steps back, and ran.

“HAAAAH!”

He leapt even further than Meg and landed easily on the opposite bank.

“Seron! Here!” he cried, pushing the rod over again. But at that very moment—

“Ah! Curse you, newspaper club! Curse you and your underhanded tactics!” Wilkinson roared, popping out of the woods.

Seron fumbled as he tried to catch the rod, dropping it.

“Oh!” Meg cried.

“It’s okay, Seron. Stay calm, buddy,” Larry instructed.

Seron crouched down and grabbed the rod, then emulated Larry as he took several steps backwards.

Before him was the stream, which looked wider than ever before.

Beyond, his best friend and a beautiful girl with long flowing hair. Both waving and cheering.

Seron’s breaths were ragged.

“Can I really do this?” he wondered to himself.

“You gotta jump, Seron! They’re coming!” Larry urged. Seron turned.

“AAARGH!” Wilkinson was charging like a wildebeest, only 10 meters away.

“Ugh!”

There was no time to lose; Seron broke into a run.

“Jump!” “Seron!”

He heard two voices. And stuck the end of the rod into the stream.

“Oh no!” Meg cried.

Seron had stuck the rod too close to the near shore.

He slowly drew an arc over the stream, falling in slow motion.

“Not good!” Larry hissed, rushing to the bank. Meg was hot on his heels.

“Ah!” Seron yelled, suddenly aware of his situation. He would not make it.

In midair, he stretched his legs as far forward as he could. That was enough to put his two feet on the grass just above the sloped bank.

“Whoa!”

But he slipped.

To make matters worse, his legs had given out in midair, which meant he was tumbling back-first toward the water.

Seron’s back hit the grass. He began sliding rapidly towards the stream, head-first.

“Argh!” “Please!”

Larry and Meg leapt, grabbing Seron’s left and right leg respectively.

There was a small splash.

As Meg and Larry clung to the ground, holding Seron's legs, and as the ski club watched from across the shore, Seron's head broke the water's surface.

His hair alone was in the stream, as though he were getting his hair washed at a salon. The water lapped at his forehead.

Seron looked at Wilkinson upside-down.

“Pull!”

“Yes!”

Larry and Meg hauled Seron up the bank. His hair was dragged out of the water.

“Agh!”

Seron also did what he could, grabbing the grass under him and pulling himself into a sitting position.

“Here,” Larry said, offering a hand.

Seron grabbed Larry's hand with both of his own.

“Graaagh!”

Larry pulled him all the way up in one tense motion. Seron leaned forward in one go, droplets of water spraying from his hair. And he fell onto the grass.

“Hah! Hah!” Seron gasped, his face and jacket becoming drenched with the water from his hair.

“You did it, man!” Larry cheered. Meanwhile, Meg was also taking action.

“I will never let you have it!” she declared, grabbing the rod as it floated partway into the stream.

Wilkinson, who had been reaching for the rod with his teammates' support, watched the rod snatched out of his reach. “Ugh! Damn it! Forget this, guys! Let's go!”

The ski club immediately returned to the trail.

“Seron! Megmica! We're going too! Can you run?”

“Yes! Come, Seron! Stand!”

“Yeah... All right.”

Meg gave Seron's arm a gentle tug, pulling him to his feet. Seron slicked his hair back to keep it out of the way.

Larry broke into a run. Meg and Seron followed quickly after.

The grassy field was bumpy and difficult to sprint along, so Larry's team remained mindful of the terrain as they ran.

When Larry glanced to the right, he spotted the ski club furiously running down the trail across the stream. When he looked back, he saw Seron lagging behind.

“Seron! If you lose here, Megmica's efforts are gonna go to waste!”

“No!”

Seron sped up slightly.

“Do your best work, Seron!”

Seron sped up even more.

With his hair slicked back, Seron gritted his teeth and grimaced and ran and ran and ran.

With water dripping from his hair and sweat from his face, he kept his eyes trained on the head of long black hair fluttering before his eyes.

“Not good...”

Larry, running ahead of the others, spotted the teachers at the finish line. At the same time, he glimpsed the bridge at the edge of his line of sight. Along with—

“WE’RE NOT GONNA LOSE!”

The ski club members, who had just begun to cross the bridge.

Larry turned to check on Seron and Meg.

“It’s gonna be a close one...”

Though he was in the clear, Seron and Meg would be overtaken by the ski club. Larry took a deep breath.

“Megmica! Take Seron’s hand! And help him forward!”

“Y-yes!” Meg replied. “Here!”

She held out her left hand towards Seron.

Seron reached out with his right hand. And he hesitated.

“Now! With me!”

But he did not hesitate a second time. He took her hand and held on tight.

Larry looked ahead once more.

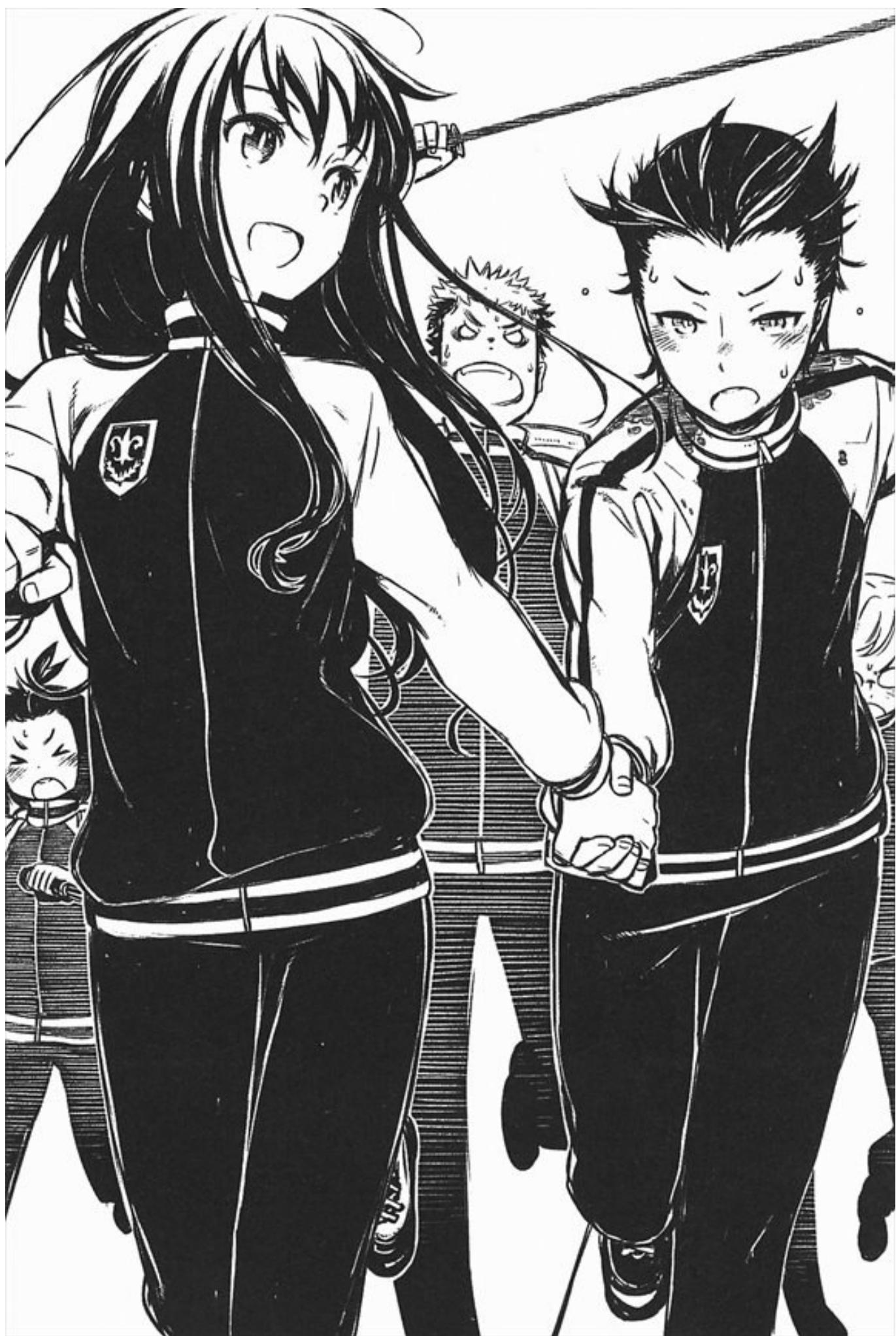
And without another look back, he sprinted right past the finish line.

“Aha ha ha!” he laughed, turning again.

He watched Meg and Seron cross the finish line hand-in-hand, the furious members of the ski club hot on their heels.

As five students passed him by, Larry muttered to himself,

“Man, I’m hungry.”



* * *

“So how’d it feel when you cut your hair short, chief?” Natalia asked Jenny, after finishing off Larry’s sandwich.

“Lighter.”

“Sure, that’s kinda expected.”

“Not my head. My heart.”

“I see.”

“And I realized then that people can start over again as many times as they want.”

“Oh, chief,” Natalia said sympathetically, pulling Jenny into a hug again. “We’re buddies for life, okay? One soul in two bodies!”

“Ack! I can’t breathe!”

This time, Nick also joined in. He hugged Jenny from her right.

“Make that three bodies, Jenny. I will help you fight your battles.”

“Hm.”

“Oh wow, look at that,” a student remarked, passing by Jenny’s team, “Three girls hugging on a bench. Odd.”

* * *

“Both teams have answered all questions correctly! So the winner is the newspaper club with their one-second lead!” the teacher declared.

“Aw, yeah!” “We did it!” “Phew...”

Larry, Meg, and Seron cheered.

“NOOOO!” “Dammit!” “Ugh, we were so close!”

The ski club, meanwhile, fell to their knees as the light of hope was snuffed out before their eyes.

“You were great, all of you!” the teacher said with a smile, “One hour and 10 minutes. That’s a park record! They’ve never seen such a close match!”

But the teacher’s praises did not reach the students.

“Seron! Megmica! We did it!” “We did it! Yes, we did it!”

As Larry and Meg jumped for joy, Seron quietly bowed his head.

“Thanks, you two. And I’m sorry for being such a burden.”

But Meg reached for his forehead.

“Huh?”

Seron looked up in surprise and came face-to-face with a frowning Meg.

Her long hair was gathered in a bunch over her left shoulder. Meg furrowed her brow angrily, her cheeks puffed up.

“What is this, Seron? You solved all the quizzes smoothly! Without you we will still be in the forest!”

Seron stared, his hair still slicked back and his jaw dropping. The fair girl with dark hair seemed for all the world to be an alien creature.

“Do not say bad things about yourself. Yah!”

Meg’s fist gave Seron’s forehead a gentle tap. But her frown quickly gave way to a smile.

“Now that I look, this hairstyle is cool as well. It is too cool that you only should do it sometimes.”

“Th-thank you...”

“You’re welcome!”

Meg’s beaming face burned into his eyes, Seron took a deep breath.

“Megmica, I—”

A slight distance away, Larry quivered as though having spotted a landmine—

“—I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Larry sighed, his shoulders sagging. But Meg smiled more radiantly than ever before.

“Please believe in me! I am a big sister. Lean on me every time!”

* * *

“Hey guys!”

“We are here!”

“Hey there.”

After putting the rod back where they had found it, Larry’s team crossed the woods and returned to the bench where Jenny’s team had taken up residence.

Natalia, Jenny, and Nick were having a good time snacking and chatting.

“Ah! Speak of the devil!” Natalia exclaimed. Larry frowned.

“You’d better not have told ‘em any embarrassing stories, Lia.”

“Whoa, even I don’t know where you learned to read minds like that, Larry.”

“Damn it...”

Jenny looked up at Larry. “You’d better have come in first.”

Larry turned. Meg was smiling proudly, and Seron’s hair was drying off into a messy mop.

“Yep. We beat the ski club.”

“Good work.” Jenny smiled. Larry did as well.

“Megmica, why’d you let your hair down?” Natalia asked, “Did Seron do that?”

“Pardon me? No. I, at the end, fell a little and the hair ribbons flew. But it is okay!”

“I see. It wasn’t too tough running like that?”

“No, it was very fun. I jumped for the first time in a very long time over a river!”

“A river?”

“Yes!” Meg nodded. Natalia tilted her head.

“I must say, that hairstyle suits you quite well, Seron,” Nick remarked, “Why not slick your hair back more often?”

“Maybe just once in a while.”

Larry rummaged through the two rucksacks they had left behind. One of the lunch boxes was empty.

“I can’t believe you actually ate it!”

“Hey, you gave me permission.”

“...Never mind. Let’s get back to the plaza and eat. You guys didn’t even try for the checkpoints, did you?”

“Don’t act like a know-it-all and treat us like lazy bums at the same time just because it’s true,” Natalia complained, getting to her feet and offering Jenny a hand. “Well, chief?”

Jenny took Natalia’s hand and stood.

“If you’re all going, so am I.”

The newspaper club slowly strolled down the trail.

“We’re gonna win this one, guys!” A junior-classman yelled as he passed by with his team.

“Ha ha! Good luck, kids,” Natalia cheered.

“So what did you guys do? Chat for an entire hour?” Larry asked.

“More or less. Girl talk.”

“I participated as well, for your information,” said Nick.

“Men aren’t supposed to sweat the details.”

“I simply couldn’t help myself.”

Meg, who had been walking at the very front with Seron, turned. There was a curious look in her eye.

“About what did you speak?”

“Stuff,” Natalia replied.

“Stuff?”

“So much stuff I couldn’t answer in one sentence. Jenny’ll tell you someday, so look forward to it.”

“Wha- wait! ...Okay, I’ll tell you someday, Megmica.” Jenny surrendered.

“Yes!”

Satisfied, Meg looked forward again, her long hair cascading down her back.

Seron looked forward as well, keeping pace next to her.

Without a word, with a blank yet happy face, he walked.

Chapter 4: We are the Newspaper Club

Part 1: You Head to the Capital District

Your shock is understandable.

“Me? A Capital District secondary school?”

After all, you attend a secondary school in the Republic of Raputoa, thousands of kilometers from the Special Capital District.

Your parents are farmers, neither particularly rich nor poor. Simply put, you are an ordinary student living in an ordinary countryside.

And yet you are being sent to a bustling metropolis to attend a secondary school that you are certain is full of heirs and heiresses. You suspect that the teacher must be playing a particularly cruel joke on you.

There are all kinds of rumors going around about the middle-aged teacher. Some say he swore at a waiter at a restaurant, or that he sexually harassed a young female teacher at the faculty conference. He is infamous for his rotten character. So it is no surprise you ask again, trying not to sound too accusatory.

“Maybe there was a mistake, sir?”

“You’re accusing me of making a mistake?” the teacher shoots back, his round belly trembling. He seems always to be on the verge of developing diabetes.

‘*With your diet, yeah,*’ you think to yourself, but you are not so clueless as to say so out loud at a time like this. And now that you think about it, this teacher also has a history of making spelling mistakes in class.

You stay silent. The teacher continues.

“You will leave for the 4th Capital Secondary School next month on a four-week exchange program. You will be housed in the campus dormitories. This is not a joke; it is a message from the Ministry of Education.”

The Ministry of Education. Suddenly the joke stops sounding like one. Still hesitant, you ask what you must.

“Could I ask why?”

“No need, I’m telling you now. Have you ever heard of Ra Ze-Ohm?”

It is an unfamiliar acronym. You shake your head.

“It stands for ‘Republic of Raputoa Broader Horizons Student Exchange Program’, which was started last year. You wouldn’t know the details.”

It bothers you to have to nod at such a condescending comment, but you have little choice in the matter.

“The program’s aim is to allow the future pillars of Raputoan society to experience the advanced ways of the Capital District and broaden their horizons. Pah. It’s like the Ministry of Education isn’t even trying to hide that we’re an underdeveloped little country.”

“R-right...” you reply for response’s sake, but a part of you is outraged.

‘*Who cares if Raputoa is in the countryside?*’

The Republic of Raputoa is situated on the eastern bank of the Lutoni River, which runs between Roxche and Sou Be-II. It is a beautiful country with rolling plains, fields, and forests. Mother nature is mostly intact in Raputoa, unlike in other member states.

'I like Raputoa, you old pig! Have some pride for your own country! Hold your head high, not your gut!' you think, but say nothing.

The teacher continues to explain the program.

"The Ministry of Education sends one student every term—in spring and autumn—to the Capital District to try out their advanced facilities and curriculum, and to get a taste of life in the city. They want you to broaden your horizons, make new friends, and use the experience to make Raputoa a better place someday."

The explanation continues.

"The program lasts for a month, but it can be extended so long as you do not make any trouble there. All expenses are paid for by the state—in other words, your tuition and dormitory expenses are all covered by the Republic. By your parents' tax money. They are also granting you an allowance."

"I see..."

Setting your anger aside, you muse to yourself about how lucky you are to be chosen for an all-expenses paid program.

"This term, the Ministry of Education chose this school. And this school chose you. Do you understand why?"

"What? No, sir."

You shake your head again. You cannot think of a reason.

"How humble of you," the teacher remarks snidely, "It's because you have the highest grades in the entire school."

Now that you think about it, he is right.

You never really think about it, but you have never not been at the top of your class since starting here.

"Of course. Er...it's an honor, sir," you reply mechanically, internally brimming with excitement.

You do not dislike Raputoa, but in all your 14 years you have never once visited the Capital District.

The Republic of Raputoa is situated at the western tip of the Roxcheanuk Confederation. Geographically, it is closer to the land west of the river—the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa—than it is to the Capital.

You have, in fact, visited Sou Be-II on a trip across the river in primary school.

You remember how the language they spoke at the Western primary school—Bezelese—was completely incomprehensible.

When Roxche was first formed, the Confederation strictly enforced the use of the standardized Roxchean language. That decision had its advantages, as anyone from anywhere in Roxche can now communicate without difficulty, but it also eliminated all foreign languages from the eastern half of the continent.

During the trip, you were fascinated by the first foreign language to reach your ears. And once you started attending secondary school, you always made sure to take Bezelese class every term.

Because Raputoa is so close to the border, many people are keen on learning the language. And at times, a Bezelese-speaking teacher comes across the river to teach classes.

The Capital District is very far removed from that life you live.

The Special Capital District is an area independent from all other member states. It is the center of Roxchean politics, economy, and culture. Though there is no class or caste system in Roxche anymore, it is where the president, politicians, and the richest of the rich—in other words, the upper classes—reside.

Black-and-white photographs of the Capital District come flooding into your mind.

What kind of people will you meet attending secondary school in such a city?

Your stay will be a short one, but you begin to imagine studying, befriending, and having fun with students in the Capital District.

The teacher catches you grinning.

“Never had stupid programs like this when I was your age... Tch. If they have the budget to spare, they could have fixed up our building...” he grumbles, “Try not to get bullied by the rich Capital District students. And try not to let your Raputoan show, if that’s even possible.”

Why is this teacher taking out his anger on you?

You think for a moment and find an answer.

‘*You’re jealous of me!*’ you think, absolutely convinced, but manage to swallow the thought before it leaves your mouth.

* * *

“Hey, is it true?”

You have just accepted the offer for the program, signed and sent in the forms, and received the official acceptance letter—

“How’d you know?”

—When the entire school suddenly seems to be informed.

You do not know who leaked the information, or if the school itself was responsible for the leak (no doubt for promotional purposes, if true).

“Wow! Lucky!”

“Bring back some souvenirs, eh?”

“Take me along in your suitcase!”

“Don’t turn delinquent on us in the Capital District!”

“Don’t suffocate on the exhaust!”

Your classmates bombard you with congratulations, requests, and warnings.

“An entire month chilling in the Capital District? That’s ridiculous! What gives?”

And some jealousy as well.

Meanwhile, your parents pause in shock when you break the news—

“That’s wonderful, honey. Have fun.”

But they give you more support than anyone else. And—

“Isn’t it wonderful that the government is covering all the expenses?”
You expected nothing less from your parents.

The tenth month goes by in a flash as you prepare to leave.

You receive a thorough health examination at a nearby hospital.

It is your first time getting an examination that lasts an entire half-day. The results could potentially break your chances of going, but thankfully the doctor gives you the green light.

You receive the money you need for the program.

You almost wonder if the Ministry of Education made a mistake when you look at the amount on the money order.

You are tempted to immediately deposit half into your savings account, but when you hear that the cost of living is much higher in the Capital District, you set the thought aside.

You will have to buy your own school supplies. And since you are getting the chance to live in the Capital District, you will need spending money—and quite a bit of it.

You go back into town and buy a suitcase.

The store has many on display, but you are only allowed to bring one. You buy the biggest you can carry.

The program information package arrives.

The package includes brief warnings and things of note, but also an informational pamphlet on the 4th Capital Secondary School, which you will attend for a month.

“What the heck...?”

You are overwhelmed.

The pamphlet itself is cause for shock. It is printed in full color—a luxury unheard of for schools in Raputoa. You wonder if all primary school students in the Capital District get glimpses at their options from pamphlets like this.

There are no other secondary schools in your area, so you never had a choice to begin with. It is almost impossible to imagine getting a choice of schools at all.

Another cause for shock is the area around the campus. Five-story apartment buildings stand like a forest around it. You have never seen so many similar buildings clustered together in one area.

It is completely different from your secondary school, which stands in a field where the horizon is visible, is an hour away from home on foot, and dense with insects at night. All they seem to have in common is the label ‘secondary school’.

The school itself is, of course, no less spectacular.

A paved roundabout sits before the gates, with expensive cars parked by the curb.

The roundabout is about three times wider than the dirt-paved crossing at the local station, where old buses spout black smoke as they idle.

This must be from a movie, you tell yourself. You spot a car with a long body. It reminds you of a dachshund. Someone must have made a mistake when they were developing the photo, you assume.

The buildings are magnificent. If the pamphlet didn't label it as such, you would never guess that it is a school at all.

The student cafeteria by the central gardens are almost too splendid for your sensibilities. It looks like what you picture to be a five-star restaurant at a luxury hotel.

The foods featured look expensive and mouth-watering. Even the plates are clearly not cheap. It almost feels like a punishment that you would have to eat here every day.

The dormitory you will stay at is large enough to rival the entire school building in Raputoa, and better-equipped to boot.

The photos of the rooms, and the description which states that each room is fully furnished and houses one student, leads you to think that the dormitory was originally a hotel that has been refurbished by the school. That is the only reasonable answer you can think of.

Phone booths are lined up in the lobby of the dormitory building, about 30 in all. In Raputoa, your area has a grand total of three public telephones, none of them equipped with a booth. You often line up before the phones waiting endlessly for your turn, which makes the photo seem even more otherworldly.

You close the thick pamphlet.

Your mind goes blank.

“Aha ha ha!”

And laughter escapes your lips.

You will live in this strange, foreign world for an entire month. The thought excites you.

“Gods bless Raputoa!” you cry, jumping onto the bed. But you lose your footing and crash to the floor.

It hurts.

* * *

You leave for the Capital District on the 29th of the tenth month.

You begin the day by heading to school as you usually do. You greet the teachers and listen to their advice and warnings. The school even holds a small going-away party for you.

“Remember the pride of Raputoa and represent our school to your best efforts!” the headmaster says in a half-sob of joy. He even salutes, having grown up when conscription was still in effect. Even though it's not as though you are going into battle.

Soon, the car from the Ministry of Education arrives.

You finally take the first step outside, to the Capital District.

“Come back alive, yeah?”

“Don't forget! Be proud of your homeland!”

“Don't pick fights even if they call you a hick!”

“Souvenirs! Souvenirs!”

“Don't come back a Cappie, you hear me?”

“Yeah! We don't need any Cappies around here!”

Your friends lean out the classroom windows, waving and shouting. It is supposed to be class time now. And what in the world is a Cappie, you wonder as you tilt your head.

“Thanks, everyone!” you reply, waving vigorously. Then you step into the car marked with the emblem of the Republic of Raputoa’s Ministry of Education. It is driven by a civil servant and not even close to being a recent model.

The seats are flat with use, clearly uncomfortable to sit on.

The car takes you home, giving you time to grab your suitcase and winter coat.

The coat is for the chilly weather to come over the next month. Inside the suitcase are extra uniforms and textbooks.

You wanted to take some of Raputoa’s specialty products, but because agricultural products cannot be transported freely, you instead opted for several books about the country.

During your stay in the Capital District, you are to wear your Raputoan school uniform. On the left sleeve of your navy jacket is a large Raputoan flag, and your school emblem is embroidered over the left breast. The emblem of the Republic of Raputoa’s Ministry of Education is embroidered on the collar. Your tie is patterned with red and black checkers.

It is not as impressive as the uniforms you saw in the pamphlet for the 4th Capital Secondary School, but it is filled with your pride for your homeland. You are not cowed in the least.

All the emblems and flags does seem a bit much, however.

The uniforms at the Capital District school are all from luxury brands, each one tailor-made and astronomically expensive. It costs many times as much as one of your uniforms. Not even the Ministry of Education could fit one reasonably into the budget, so you are mandated to wear your own uniform. But you will be borrowing a school-issue tracksuit from the 4th Capital Secondary School.

As you set out, you say goodbye to your parents.

“Take care with the water, honey. I hear some of the taps are actually for liquor.”

“Have fun. Don’t get too homesick.”

Your parents worry over the most trivial things.

“Don’t worry! I’ll be fine,” you reply with a smile, getting back in the car.

The car starts. The village where you were born and raised disappears into the distance.

You have never left your home for so long in your entire life.

But you are neither nervous nor sad.

* * *

You are not nervous, but the trip is long.

First is the shaky eight-hour car ride.

Other than during the brief lunch break, you are traveling continuously across the Republic of Raputoa. The familiar fields and the horizon continue as far as the eye can see.

You shift around many times during the ride. The bumpy dirt roads and the flat seats hurt your buttocks.

The driver advises you to roll up your coat to use as a cushion. You follow his advice and immediately feel the difference.

Around evening, you arrive at Raputoa City—the capital of Raputoa.

Raputoa City is the largest city in the republic. It is your first time here as well. Just the sight of high-rise buildings past the dusky horizon sends your heart aflutter.

You see an airport for the first time in your life.

Raputoa's Leonhart International Airport, situated on the outskirts of the city. It is the largest airport in the area, and because of its proximity to the border it is also often used by Sou Be-II airlines.

Two long runways run side-by-side on the wide-open space. Large cake-shaped fuel tanks lie on the pavement.

In spite of the word 'port' in the word 'airport', there is no ship in sight. You are awestruck.

And you finally get a glimpse at something you have only seen in books—an aeroplane, or specifically, several of them.

How does something shaped like that fly, you wonder to yourself. You still do not understand, when one of the aeroplanes rumbles loudly as it takes off into the air.

You spend the night at a lodging in the airport.

You are forced to share a room with six other guests, but you cannot afford to use precious tax money on luxuries. But because everyone has a bed to themselves, you enjoy a good night's sleep.

You even get the chance to speak with some of your roommates before you go to bed. They are scheduled to board the same flight, and are surprised first by your youth and then by the fact that you are a government-funded scholarship student.

From the way your roommates dress, you guess that aeroplane tickets must cost a fortune, and then some.

* * *

The next day. The 30th.

The weather is great again. It is a perfect day for flying.

The aeroplane takes off on time early in the morning.

The aeroplane sparkles, sunlight glinting off the engine on each wing.

Someone says that this is the latest model, but you do not know what about the aeroplane exactly is better than the rest. All you know is that the fishlike body of the plane is very impressive.

You climb the stairs as instructed and enter the round cabin. It is completely different from the rectangular interior of the local buses.

When the engines start, the aeroplane rumbles. You remember hearing about how loud the engines could get, but this goes beyond anything you have ever expected. You begin to understand why earplugs are provided.

And, for the first time in your life, you fly.

The aeroplane glides gracefully into the air and gives you a glimpse from a whole new angle.

The large city grows smaller in the distance and disappears.

The plains are aglow with the orange light of dawn. It is beautiful. And when the sun rises fully, the sky and the ground change colors, never giving you time to get bored of the scenery.

You cling to the window and watch the world pass by until landing.

The aeroplane lands once to refuel and give passengers time for food and a short walk.

You do not think you will ever get tired of watching the ground draw near and then grow distant again.

You want to keep staring out the window, but soon the world below is obscured by cloud cover.

You sit in your seat with nothing to do, and eventually sleep takes over. You open your eyes to the vibrations of the aeroplane landing.

Your second landing. You are just outside the Capital District.

“Ah, we’re here. Welcome to the Capital District,” the passenger next to you says, to your disbelief.

But when you disembark, you can disbelieve no longer. Until that morning you were in the Republic of Raputoa, surrounded by its green horizons. But now, in the evening, you are staring at countless high-rises and apartments in the distance.

“Aeroplanes are terrifying...” you mumble, standing on the airstrip.

“You say that *now*?” another passenger quips.

Two men from the 4th Capital Secondary School are waiting for you at the airport.

Both are in their thirties, but one looks friendly and the other decidedly less so. The friendly one introduces himself as a teacher and flashes his ID. When you internally wonder who the other man is, the teacher explains.

“This is our bodyguard. The school hired him for our safety.”

You are floored.

“I’m just a secondary school student from Raputoa, sir. I’m no one important.”

“Yes, we understand. But sometimes kidnappers strike arbitrarily, so we can never be too careful.”

You want to go back.

This is the first and last time during your trip that the thought crosses your mind.

The teacher takes you to a shiny, sturdy-looking car.

There isn’t a speck of dust on its surface, and the tires do not smell of horse dung. The trunk is large enough for your suitcase, and then three of you on top of that.

But there is no school emblem or marking on the car. When you point that out, the teacher explains.

“Yes, the car is not marked because any emblems might make us a target for kidnappers or attackers.”

You take hesitant steps into the car.

The back seat is made of luxurious leather. Soft, but not too soft. Your buttocks would never get sore on this seat, you think to yourself.

“We’re heading off now. Please put on your seatbelt.”

You do as you are told and notice something.

That you have never heard a teacher say ‘please’ to a student before.

The car seems to glide its way out of the airport. Soon, you enter the Special Capital District.

And everything comes into view.

Six-lane streets paved to perfection. And sidewalks lining the streets.

The countless cars that manage to cause congestion in spite of the quality of the streets.

The endless streams of impeccably-dressed pedestrians at the crossing.

The jam-packed streetcars sweeping down the middle of the road, and the large buses—also packed—driving down the bus-only lanes.

The high-rises you cannot see the tops of without tilting back your head.

The fine infrastructure that must have cost countless Roxes from the Confederation government’s vaults.

The military base-sized train station, which is the last station in the line, and the department stores looming beyond it. The advertising balloons floating over the rooftops make them seem even more like military bases.

You are stunned into silence by the sights that fill your eyes.

For the first time in your life, you realize that there are some places in the world where the horizon simply is not visible.

By the time the car glides all the way to the school, the sun has already set.

But the streetlights dotting the campus make the night a brighter one than you have ever seen in your hometown. It feels strange to see the lights lined up at regular intervals.

“You must be exhausted. Here, let me carry your suitcase.”

You step through the gates, leaving your suitcase to the teacher.

To your surprise, stationed at the gates is a security guard armed with a gun. You must show him your student ID to enter. The teacher handed you yours in the car—with the ID, you cannot enter the premises. You resolve to put your ID on a lanyard.

The intersection and the luxurious school facilities are all exactly as you remember from the pamphlet. There was no lie, exaggeration, or manipulation in the photos.

The streetlights on campus cast warm orange light onto the buildings.

“We’ll give you a briefing tomorrow, so please get some rest. This building will be your home for the next month.”

The building the teacher brings you to, as with the rest of the school, looks exactly as it did in the photos.

Two boys are chatting by the entrance. They are the first students you have seen at the 4th Capital Secondary School. They are around your age, or a little older.

They are wearing identical school-issue tracksuits. The tracksuits are green like the uniforms, with lines running down the arms and legs and the school emblem embroidered over the right breast. You are excited to try on such an elegantly-designed outfit.

When the students spot the teacher, they greet him. They seem completely calm.

“Good evening, boys. Is the dormitory cafeteria emptying out about now?” the teacher asks.

“Perfect timing, sir. There isn’t even a line at this point,” one of the students replies.

And as expected, their eyes then fall on you.

“G-good evening,” you say.

The teacher introduces you to the boys.

“This is ——, an exchange student from the Republic of Raputoa who will be staying with us for the next month. Could you believe —— was just in Raputoa, all the way by the Lutoni, until this morning? Aeroplanes are making the world a better place.”

“Wow, cool,” one of the boys says. They seem to know about the exchange program.

You brace yourself for what they will say next. But the first thing out of the boy’s mouth is—

“I recommend the beef stew today! It’s really good!”

Your eyes turn to dinner plates. The boys burst out laughing.

“Welcome to the 4th Capital Secondary School!”

“Thank you!” you reply.

* * *

The next day. The 1st day of the eleventh month.

You open your eyes in your dorm room, feeling refreshed. It is your first morning at the 4th Capital Secondary School.

Last evening, you were floored by the sheer size and scale, and the incredible quality of the dormitory cafeteria, before being kindly led all the way to your room by the matron. You soon fell asleep in the room, which was heated 24 hours a day.

The first thing you see in the morning is the school grounds, and the veritable forest of apartment buildings beyond. You almost feel like the window is a massive framed painting.

You wish you had a camera with you. You want to share this incredible view with your classmates and your family.

But you cannot possibly afford such a thing. Your family does not have one, and even your school only has a few.

Excited and disappointed at the same time, you have breakfast at the dormitory cafeteria. The selection and the quality of the food seem to have come straight out of a hotel, though you have never been to one before.

Though there are other students around you, you are alone. Which is natural, as this is your first day here. But there are surprisingly many other students eating alone.

Thankfully for you, eating alone does not seem to be uncommon here.

The teacher from last night comes to get you at the dorms and gives you a full tour of the campus. He points out all the facilities and provisions as he guides you through the massive school, and you take detailed notes while drawing a map.

For a moment you wonder where you could buy school supplies, but when the teacher explains that most school supplies are available at the campus store, you breathe a sigh of relief.

You have lunch at the dormitory cafeteria before meeting with an advising teacher at the faculty office.

First, the advisor asks you how far your studies have come along in Raputoa. You recite your current progress for all your subjects.

But immediately, you feel anxious.

“Do I have to take a test, by any chance?”

“This *is* the test,” the advisor chuckles, “and you’ve passed with flying colors.”

The advisor suggests what courses you should take, pointing out classes that would let you continue your studies from Raputoa without overlapping. Some of the classes are for third-years, you point out nervously, but—

“I’m sure you’ll manage just fine,” the advisor assures you. Before you know it, you are holding your completed timetable.

That evening, you return to your room and write to your parents and your classmates.

‘I’ve arrived safely at the Capital District. I will study hard and make many friends whom I can keep in touch with even after I return home. I will write again next week.’

* * *

Eight days later, on a weekend afternoon.

You sit at your desk, staring at the blank piece of paper meant to be a letter to your parents.

“I...haven’t made any friends...” you agonize, head in your hands.

Your week went by in a flash.

Classes began on the 2nd day of the 11th month.

You went to class in a clearly different uniform. People stared, but did not come to speak with you or try to make friends with you.

You had forgotten that the 4th Capital Secondary School was home to more students than your own school.

The students at the 4th Capital Secondary School did not pay much attention to others on campus, and were not particularly concerned about you. And the morning rush was another matter altogether; you almost suffocated in the crowds, to which rush hour back in your hometown did not hold a candle.

In your first class, the teacher introduced you.

“This is ———, an exchange student from the Republic of Raputoa who will be studying with us for the next month. Please get along.”

And you introduced yourself as well, but your classmates did not surround you during break out of curiosity or anything of the sort. All they did was speak with you for group exercises. It was completely different from your own school, which received perhaps one transfer student a year and each new student received the full attention of the entire student body.

During breaks, you had to move to a different classroom and the campus was so large you never had time to talk with your classmates.

The classes themselves were much harder than in Raputoa.

You could not help but be impressed by the teachers and students at the 4th Capital Secondary School. It was hard for you to match their pace, but the lessons themselves were very enjoyable.

And so, the week went on.

Every day, you woke up, had breakfast, went to class, had a delicious lunch at the incredible dormitory cafeteria, went to afternoon class, and returned to your room or the library to study—alone.

Being alone did not bother you. Many other students often kept to themselves. You were doing a fine job of studying in the Capital District, doing exactly as the program guidelines dictated.

Yesterday was the first day of the weekend, so you took a walk around the area. You just walked and walked because you did not want to spend money.

It was fun getting a look at the endless rows of apartment buildings and the streets around campus, but naturally you were completely alone.

“I can’t write anything...”

You bragged to everyone that you would make many friends. But you cannot lie to them. You do not know what to do.

Finally, you manage to write, ‘At first the classes were so hard I had to study the whole time. But now that I’ve gotten used to the pace, I’m going to get out there and make friends’, packaging the cold truth as nicely as you possibly can.

* * *

The next day. The 10th day of the eleventh month.

At lunchtime, you finish your food quickly and visit the advisor to discuss your situation.

“I see. First off, I’m glad you aren’t having any trouble keeping up with classes. That’s one of the biggest issues exchange students struggle with. I expected nothing less from you,” the advisor says, “Now, it’s not uncommon for students here to have a hard time making friends. There are so many people here that sometimes it takes first-year students half a year to really connect with someone. But you don’t have that kind of time, so...”

The teacher makes a suggestion that completely changes the next three weeks of your life.

“...How about joining a club?”

“Is that even possible?” you ask. You assumed that your stay was not long enough to allow you to join a club.

“You certainly can. I’m sorry, I should have told you,” the advisor says, and takes out a list of all the clubs in the school.

There was a list of clubs on the pamphlet you received earlier, and you looked at each and every one. But you never really considered them carefully because you never thought you would be able to join.

Appropriately enough considering the large student population, there are many clubs at the 4th Capital Secondary School. Your interest is particularly piqued by the fencing club, the car racing club, the billiards club, the bowling club, the Capital District history research club, the teddy bear-making club, and the creative cooking club, among others.

“Were you in a club back in Raputoa?” the advisor asks.

“No, because I had to help out at home during the busy farming season. A lot of my classmates are in the same boat, so our school doesn’t have a strong tradition of club activities,” you confess. The advisor seems to sense the difference in culture.

“I understand. Shall we have a close look at the clubs, then? The athletic clubs might be a bit difficult if you don’t have any prior knowledge.”

You agree.

You walk almost 10 kilometers to school every day and are confident in your stamina, but you have never been called athletic. Your marks in physical education are lower than the rest.

“How about one of the liberal arts clubs? Do any of them look interesting?”

You scan the list.

Everything seems at least a little interesting, but that makes it even harder to decide. You scan faster.

“Hm?”

And you spot a certain club at the bottom of the list.

“Huh.”

The club was not listed on the pamphlet you received earlier. You are quite confident in your memory.

You think for a moment, and—

“Er, about this club,” you say, “The newspaper club. It sounds interesting. What does it do exactly?”

Part 2: You Head to the Newspaper Club

It is after class. You are standing at the door to the newspaper club's office.

The halls and the first floor of the classroom building, which is closed in the evenings, are deserted. Though classes only just ended, it is strangely quiet.

Before you knock on the door, you recall what happened at lunchtime.

“The newspaper club...” the advisor trailed off, as though having stumbled upon a historical site in the middle of construction.

In other words, the construction could not happen unless the historical site was covered up, but that was no longer possible.

But the advisor still answered your question.

“The newspaper club was only recently recognized as an official club.”

It was a vague answer, but you couldn't tell why. Still, you assumed it would be easier to join a club that had only recently been formed.

“So that's why it wasn't on the pamphlet. What does the club do?”

“They publish newspapers to post on the walls around campus. It's a student-oriented newspaper by students and for students.”

It sounded wonderful to you. Your school had a teacher on newsletter duty, but no newspaper written from the students' perspective.

“But they only have six members at the moment.”

“That's amazing,” you breathed. It sounded very exclusive. The six students must have been a tight-knit group.

“The president is a rather famous girl in her third year...”

“Ah, a charismatic president?”

It was surprising that the club was led by someone famous in such a big school. Not only that, she was not even close to being in her sixth year, as many club presidents tended to be.

It sounded fun.

You decided that you would spend the few weeks you had left in the Capital District with the newspaper club.

You asked the advisor how to sign up for the club. Normally a student would have to speak to the supervisor, but the advisor suggested something different.

“You should go visit their office first. Get to know the members before you officially sign up.”

You wondered if you really didn't need to speak to the supervisor first, but the advisor said it was all right.

So you concluded that the president of the newspaper club was trusted so completely by her supervisor that she was given full authority over the club. You began to admire the president even more.

After thanking the advisor, you looked around the halls, hoping to find the newspaper club's latest issue, but found none in sight.

Instead, you spotted the results of the recent Orienteering Day competition.

You briefly scanned the results—an orienteering competition was unthinkable for your own school—when you spotted something.

“Ah!”

The newspaper club had clinched a spectacular victory, according to the poster, beating the ski club (with their inherent advantage) by a single second. You were even more fired up to join this club.

Heart pounding, you finished afternoon classes and came straight to the newspaper club. And now you stand at the door.

“All right!”

You steel yourself so as to make a good impression, and fix your tie.

Knock knock knock knock.

You knock four times.

There is no answer.

You knock again, just in case, but no one seems to be in. Perhaps you are too early, or perhaps the club is taking the day off today.

There is no point in waiting at the door.

You decide to return to your room. You would put away your things and come back again. Living on campus has its advantages.

You would have to go all the way to the other side of the massive campus, but it is no difficult task. You are used to walking, and back in Raputoa a round trip between home and school would take you two hours.

As you walk down the hall, a girl comes from around the corner.

She is very tall, with her long brown hair tied up. She wears glasses with a black frame, and is carrying a bag and a large guitar case.

You pass her by. The girl casts you a glance, but continues walking.

You reach the end of the hall. As you turn the corner, you catch one last glimpse of the newspaper club office.

“Huh?”

And to your shock, you spot the guitar case going through the door. Specifically, you see the person carrying the case go inside.

“Is she in the newspaper club?”

The guitar case led you to think she was from a music club. You quickly rush back.

You come to a stop at the door, take a deep breath, and knock.

“Yes?”

This time, you hear a response.

Your jaw drops at the sheer opulence of the office.

Two comfy sofas, an expensive coffee table, a kitchenette with a hot plate, and a dish rack. And even a tea set.

On the desk in the corner is a typewriter in perfect condition. There is a cabinet, and next to it a darkroom for developing and printing photographs.

What shocks you most is the telephone.

Your family saved up for a long time to finally buy a telephone last year. And yet here is a telephone in the office of a secondary school club, as though it is the most natural thing in the world. At first glance you think it is a replica, but you soon realize that it is real.

Are all club offices in the 4th Capital Secondary School so magnificent, you wonder.

“Ah, an exchange student from Raputoa?” the bespectacled girl sitting across from you muses curiously, “Good on you for coming all this way.”

She talks almost like a boy, without a hint of reservation. But it is not irritating in the least.

The senior-classman introduces herself as Natalia Steinbeck and listens to you explain your reasons for coming.

“Gotcha. Yeah, the chief’s not gonna turn you down.”

“What? Aren’t you the president, SC Natalia?” you ask, surprised.

“Whoa, do I look like one? Ha ha!” She gives an embarrassed laugh.

Then she takes out an expensive-looking acoustic guitar and begins strumming. She seems to be in a good mood.

You listen curiously to the chords, when suddenly a voice joins in.

“The autumn~ is a lonely season~”

The door opens, and the voice becomes clear. It is a beautiful soprano.

You turn to find a girl with fair skin and dark hair tied in pigtails.

“The heart mourns and...huh?”

She freezes when she notices you. So does the sound of the guitar.

You and the pigtailed girl stare blankly at one another in surprise.

“Hey Megmica. This here’s an exchange student from Raputoa who wants to join us,” Natalia explains.

“Oh...I understand. Now I am so embarrassed,” the girl covers her face in shame. Her pronunciation and tone is slightly off, but she comes across as quite adorable.

“Don’t worry ‘bout it, Megmica! Just sing! Pour out your heart!”

Natalia strums again. The girl called Megmica turns and gives you a light bow.

“Good afternoon. My name is Strauski Megmica. I am a third-year student. I am a member of the newspaper club and the chorus club.”

You stand and introduce yourself as well. Then you ask, “Excuse me, SC Strauski, but are you by any chance from Sou Be-II?”

Natalia and Megmica seem surprised.

“How’d you guess, newbie?!”

“It is very surprising! It is true, yes.”

It is not hard to guess from her name, accent, and tone. But you do not say so.

“I am from the Republic of Raputoa, east of the Lutoni River. It is nice to meet you, SC Strauski. How are you?” you say in Bezelese. Megmica is pleasantly surprised.

“I’m doing really well, thanks! How about you?” she responds.

“I am fine as well. Thank you.”

“Your pronunciation’s really good. Have you been learning Bezelese long?”

“Yes. I have been studying Bezelese for three years. Many students in the Republic of Raputoa are studying the language very hard. And I have visited Sou Be-II just once, over the Lutoni River.”

“Wow! I’ve only seen the Lutoni from the mouth. I’m sure it must look so majestic, cutting across the continent.”

“Yes. It is a very big, motherly river.”

“MOONTONGUE!” Natalia interjects with a chord.

At the same time, the door opens.

“Hey there! Oh, is this a guest?”

“Good afternoon. Hm?”

“...”

Three boys enter the office.

“Hey! Get some tea for the guest!” Natalia orders one of the boys, without even giving him time to sit.

“What were *you* doing all this time? I’ll teach you to brew your own tea later.”

You turn to the three boys. Megmica introduces them in Roxchean.

“They are all club members. This person with long hair is Nicholas Browning, called Nick. He is good in acting and swinging a staff.”

Nick looks very feminine.

At the annual harvest festival back home, some of the men cross-dress and take on the role of ghosts who spray water at people. But the point is that it is funny to see a hulking farmer dressed up as a woman. If Nick were to take on the role, it would not be nearly as hilarious. In fact, women might get jealous of his good looks. But what does Megmica mean by ‘swinging a staff’?

“And this person with black hair,” Megmica introduces everyone by their hair, making it easier to remember them, “is Seron Maxwell. He is very smart.”

If Nick is beautiful, Seron is cool and handsome. His slightly long black hair goes well with his grey eyes.

Something occurs to you at that point, but you do not know what.

“Last, the person with blond hair in the kitchen is Larry Hepburn. His tea is very good. He is also good in reading the map. We are all in the same year.”

Larry has a small but powerful build, much like the boys back home. Most of them are muscular because they help out with farm work at home. But what about Larry? Does his family also own a farm? It is a mystery.

And just like when you were introduced to Seron, something occurs to you again.

And you soon realize what it is.

You have seen Seron and Larry somewhere. Where? Seron looks at you, then.

“You’re the exchange student from Raputoa, right?”

“Yeah! I remember!” Larry adds from the kitchenette.

“Oh?” Nick raises a curious eyebrow.

“Oh my goodness!” Megmica cries, “How did you know? Did the uniform show you?”

The uniform is indeed a giveaway, with the Raputoan flag displayed proudly on the sleeve.

But you remember now that you met Seron and Larry at the dormitory entrance on your first day here.

“It was the evening of Orienteering Day. You came to the dorms with a teacher, right?” Seron asks.

“We were on our way back from the dormitory cafeteria,” Larry chimes in, “I recommended the beef stew.”

Both of them seem to remember you.

“Yes!” you reply, “Thank you for the recommendation, The beef stew was very good. I order it every time I see it on the menu,” you say, and introduce yourself to the boys. You finish off by saying you want to join the newspaper club for the rest of your stay in the Capital District. You emphasize how you want to broaden your horizons and make new friends.

“Oh my, it is wonderful,” Megmica says, clasping her hands together.

“Sounds lovely,” Nick agrees with an elegant smile.

“Dunno who came up with the idea, but sounds good to me!” Larry pipes up from the kitchenette.

“Ah~ I see no reason to say no~” Natalia sings, strumming.

“Same,” Seron says.

“Th-thank you,” you say with a bow, moved. You are overjoyed. But something still bothers you. “Er...don’t I need the president’s permission?”

“Oh. She’s not here yet, but who cares? Tea ready yet, Larry?” Natalia waves off your concern. You are now even more curious.

“Err, what is the president like? I heard she was a famous third-year.”

“Hm...” Natalia sighs, falling into thought.

“She is a very very good person! And she is an uncommon, cool person!” Megmica comments first.

“She does have a petty side, but she is certainly fun to be around,” Nick adds.

“Yeah. She’s a weirdo, but basically a good person,” Natalia concludes.

Half the descriptions are unflattering. You wonder if Larry and Seron are keeping silent for a reason. And your guess is soon proven correct.

The door slams open.

“I heard that!”

A short girl with short red hair stomps inside. She is full of energy, the large leather bag on her back bouncing.

She must be the president, you note.

“Aw, chief. It’s not nice to eavesdrop,” Natalia scolds the girl. So she is indeed the president.

The president puts her bag on one of the desks and strides over to the sofa. She looks into your eyes just as you prepare to introduce yourself.

“An exchange student from Raputoa, huh. Interesting. Welcome to the Capital District.”

You miss your chance to stand, so you greet her from your seat.

“Thank you. Actually, I—”

“Yes.”

“Pardon?”

“Welcome to the club. I’m Jenny Jones, the president. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Th-thank you! Thank you so much, president! It’s a pleasure to meet you,” you say, bowing your head.

“How long have you been listening, chief?” Natalia asks from beside you.

“A while. I wanted to know what you guys thought of me.”

“Don’t be such a naughty girl.”

“Eavesdropping is the foundation of information gathering. Thank you for all the compliments.”

“Now, now. Take a seat, chief. The tea’s ready.”

Before you know it, Seron and Megmica are preparing the teacups. They carefully arrange the cups on the coffee table.

“Erm! If there’s anything I can do—” you begin, but are interrupted.

“Don’t worry. Sit down and relax. We’re almost done,” Seron says.

He is both handsome and courteous, which means he is probably popular with the girls.

“It’s nice to have more cups on the table once in a while,” Larry says, pouring seven cups of tea with an expert hand.

You are not certain, but the cups and saucers seem very expensive. You must take care not to break them.

It seems that afternoon tea is part of a routine school day for the 4th Capital Secondary School. You expected no less from the upper classes. You resolve to remember all this so you can tell everyone back home.

“Thank you.”

You take a sip of tea.

It is very good, no worse than the tea straight from the farms back in Raputoa. The Capital District impresses you once again.

And finally, you introduce yourself for the third time. You confess that you decided to join a club in order to make friends.

“It is a very good idea! I did this too!” Megmica says, being a transfer student.

They are all senior-classmen and can be a little strange—especially Jenny and Natalia—but you like them. They seem to be good people.

“Thank you. Oh, I have a question...” you begin, all eyes on you.

It is a very natural and inevitable question. A simple one you are sure will be answered very quickly.

“What do you have planned for your next issue?”

Everyone looks away.

“Huh?”

“Look at this, guys. Even the temporary newbie is more concerned than you!” Jenny roars.

“But it’s not like you have any ideas, chief. Non-fictional ones, I mean,” Natalia points out. She does not seem apologetic in the least.



“Let’s settle down, everyone. We had a very busy month, with midterms and Orienteering Day,” Nick says, calming the others down.

“Yes, we can decide on it now!” Megmica says optimistically.

“Yeah, the newbie got here just in time!” Larry agrees, encouraging you.

Seron, meanwhile, says nothing. He seems to be a quiet person to begin with.

“All right, then!” Jenny rises. “I’m now accepting suggestions!”

The others go silent in unison, with the exception of the already-silent Seron.

You understand the situation completely. They do not have anything to write about.

There probably isn’t much to cover in such a rich, peaceful school, you think.

Or maybe things you consider to be newsworthy are considered mundane here. Maybe that is the right answer.

You watch the others as they sip their tea.

“Ah!”

And you think of something.

It is a great idea. Divinely inspired, if you do say so yourself. You simply must share it with the others.

“Er...well...”

Six sets of eyes fall on you.

You tense, but make up your mind. You will never get another chance like this.

You take a breath, and suggest with a trembling voice—

“What about an issue that covers all the club members?”

Several seconds pass in silence.

“Er...what exactly do you mean?” Larry asks. You now have the chance to explain yourself.

“You could publish short biographies of yourselves on the next issue, and show the school the faces behind the people who make the newspapers. With photographs, too! Then more people might cooperate with you and share information.”

“R-right...”

Larry’s reaction is underwhelming, but you assume that is because he is moved by your innovative idea.

Another moment of silence.

Maybe your idea wasn’t such a good one after all.

Jenny says nothing, and Natalia continues sipping tea, her glasses fogging. Nick’s smile is plastered onto his face, and Seron—as usual—looks completely blank.

It was a stupid idea, never mind, you are about to say, when someone finally breaks the silence.

“All right.”

“Pardon?”

“I’m fine with it,” says Jenny, “it’s not a bad idea.”

You and the others turn.

Jenny sits cross-legged on the sofa, kicking etiquette to the curb. Her underwear is almost showing, but she does not seem to care, and nor do the others. So you decide not to worry about it either.

“I didn’t really feel the need to discuss the people behind the scenes, but it’s not something we necessarily need to hide. And if we’re out of ideas, it’s better than nothing.”

“You serious, chief?” Natalia asks. She seems about 20 percent worried and 80 percent psyched, although you are not sure in what sense.

“Yeah. But on one condition.”

“Like?”

“I’m the president, so I take the desk.”

You have no idea what the role of ‘desk’ entails, but it presumably goes to the highest-ranking club member.

“My job is to oversee you all,” Jenny says. Your guess is correct, it seems. “In other words, there will be no article covering me.”

“What?! That’s cheap!” Natalia complains, jumping to her feet. “I want to tell the entire school about the pain and glory of your past, the passion brimming in your heart, and your shining future!”

You realize that this was why Natalia was so psyched. Does Jenny really have such a newsworthy past, you wonder. But—

“Denied.”

The proposal is shot down mercilessly.

“Argh...dammit! Now what am I supposed to do with my white-hot passion for reporting?” Natalia agonizes, dramatically falling into the sofa.

“Just cover Larry,” Jenny suggests.

“That’s a great idea!” Natalia claps, recovering instantly.

“*Not* a great idea!” Larry retorts, “Then what happens to me?!”

It is apparent that Larry and Natalia are quite close. But you do not think that they are dating.

You understand how Larry would not want his past exposed to the entire school. You are starting to regret making that proposal.

“Then you’ll cover Nat,” Jenny says, saving the moment.

“Yes! That’s perfect!” “What? No!” Larry and Natalia reply at the same time. Jenny seems unfazed.

“You’ll just have to decide on a mutual line to stop at. It’ll help you practice for when you cover more serious stories.”

“Hm.” “Hm.” Larry and Natalia nod in unison. You are impressed by their co-ordination.

“Then what shall I do, Jenny?” Nick asks.

“Hm. I’ll have the rest of you go in a circle, then. Nick covers Megmica, Megmica covers the newbie, the newbie covers Seron, and Seron covers Nick.”

“I understand!” Megmica’s hand shoots up instantly. She might be too innocent for her own good.

“Pardon me, Jenny, but I must admit that I am not quite comfortable with this proposal. Would it bother you terribly to scrap this particular idea?” Nick asks, gently but clearly expressing opposition.

Does he not want to research things about a girl? You do not understand.

“Same here,” Seron adds coolly. “What about the rest of you?”

Silence.

You are taken aback.

The idea is yours to begin with. Though Jenny gave it the green light, you start feeling more uncomfortable.

“Er...” you speak up. “I know I’m the one who brought it up, but I think it might not be such a smart idea after all. I’m sorry.”

Everyone else responds. Larry speaks first.

“Yeah, honestly, I’d prefer not to do this one.”

“I guess so.” Natalia nods. “It might not be so fun when me and Larry are going at it revealing one secret after another. And I can tell you his embarrassing stories anytime, anyway.”

Megmica chimes in as well. “Then I will follow everyone’s decision.”

“That seems to be the best course of action,” Nick says.

“Agreed.” Seron nods.

You and the others all turn to Jenny.

Slightly displeased, she nods.

“All right. We’re not going through with this one.”

You breathe a sigh of relief.

At the same time, you resolve to think your ideas through before voicing them.

“Now...what to do?”

You are back to square one. Jenny holds out her teacup to Larry.

You are impressed that the gesture gets through, as Larry rises and pours Jenny her tea. He reminds you of an experienced old butler.

“Stuff just doesn’t happen around here as much as outside campus. Not a bad thing, I guess. Larry, gimme more tea,” Natalia says.

Inwardly, you agree. You would not like it if all the things that happen outside campus were to happen at school.

“I realized something when we were working on the previous issue,” says Nick, “our format only allows us to publish one article at a time. If we have too much, the font size becomes too small to read comfortably and we will drive away readers.”

You nod. Newspapers posted on walls are certainly different from regular ones.

“But now that we are doing it, I want to publish one this month, at least! Is seven people work together, somehow we can do it!” Megmica says.

Megmica is always optimistic and full of passion. She must have an honest and outgoing character.

“Seven people, huh,” Seron mumbles, looking up. Then he falls into thought again.

Seron is always cautious and never speaks without thinking. You suspect that nothing could possibly faze him. And you decide to take a page out of his book, so you would not confuse people with sudden, ungrounded ideas.

Seron finishes thinking and looks up.

“Why don’t we take the opportunity to get an article from the newbie’s perspective?”

“Me?” you ask. Seron nods.

“Yeah. The Republic of Raputoa is far from the capital both geographically and culturally. You could write an article about how things are different here, what you think about the school and the Capital District, and the students here. Kind of like a travelogue.”

“Wow.” You nod, impressed. You indeed felt some culture shock during your stay. And you are reasonably confident that you could think of things to write with all the experiences you have had here.

But your consent alone is not enough. You wait for everyone else.

“Hm. Not bad,” Jenny says.

“Yeah. That way the whole school gets to know about how our newbie here feels,” Natalia agrees. She may be a jokester, but she seems to get serious when necessary and stands up for her opinions.

“I agree.” “Me too. Sounds interesting.” “It is like the old times.” Nick, Larry, and Megmica also agree.

“All right, it’s decided.” Jenny slaps her knee. “Are you all right with this?”

You nod.

“Then write whatever you’d like about the Capital District and about our school. Don’t hold back; you’re not gonna be here by the time this issue goes up,” Jenny advises, “Is there anywhere you’d like to cover in the Capital District? You can go check out places over the weekends. You can take a camera along, too.”

“Does the school loan out cameras?” you ask, surprised.

You would love to take some photographs to go with your article, but would the school loan out such an expensive device to a student, even if it is for club activities?

“Nope. They’re right here.”

Jenny gets up and reaches for the bag she put on the desk earlier.

And to your shock, she takes out a large metallic camera. It looks more expensive than the one at your school.

“Wow...I can’t believe the school supplies you with something so expensive!” Capital District schools sure are different, you tell yourself.

“Actually, it belongs to Jenny,” Nick points out. You are floored.

“What?! You have your own camera?”

“Several.”

“No way!” You blink rapidly.

“Don’t assume all of us here have multiple cameras, newbie. And by the way, feel free to write about this.”

Your course is clear.

In the next 10 days, you are to put down all your thoughts into writing. You must write honestly about the Capital District and the things you felt at the 4th Capital Secondary School.

You are free to visit places in the Capital District in the weekend. Anyone who is free will accompany you with a camera and show you around.

From this point on, you must visit the newspaper club after class every day and ask about the Capital District, discuss your progress, and throw out ideas.

Because some of the newspaper club members are in other clubs, sometimes they would miss meetings. But there would almost always be someone at the office.

Your draft is due on the 23rd. Naturally, Jenny will be editing your work to make it easier to read. The newspaper will be published on the weekend of the 24th and 25th, and posted on the 26th. Then you need only wait for the students' reception to your article.

"Thank you! This sounds really fun. I'll do my best!" you say.

"Then that's all for today," Jenny says. The sky outside is already orange.

Everyone leaves the office. Natalia leaves her guitar, but you forget to ask her why she brought one in the first place.

Partway past the central gardens, the group splits into two. You and Seron head for the dorms just ahead.

"See you, Seron! And good luck with everything, newbie!"

"Bye. Ask Seron if you need any help. He knows everything."

"See you tomorrow."

"Have a good day."

"Later."

Larry, Natalia, Nick, Megmica, and Jenny head for the gates.

You walk side-by-side with Seron without a word, past the grounds filled with the shouts of the sports clubs.

The silence compels you to wonder if Seron is not fond of you. But your worries turn out to be unfounded.

"Newbie. About dinner—"

"Yes?"

"They have oyster and cheese gratin today. They only serve it a few times in the autumn, and it's really good. I highly recommend it."

"Thank you! I'll definitely give it a try."

Part 3: The Newspaper Club Says...

From the next day onwards, you head to the newspaper club after class with a spring in your step.

The other club members ask you to join them for lunch, but your class schedule does not work out. You can only meet them after class.

But there is always someone in the office, so you get to greet them, drink tea together, and chat.

Today, Seron, Larry, and Jenny are at the office.

Megmica is at the chorus club, Natalia is at the orchestra club, and Nick has extra lessons, which means the three of them miss some meetings.

Today, you talk mostly with Seron.

You ask him all kinds of questions about the Capital District.

Seron is very knowledgeable. He answers your every query clearly and calmly.

During your conversations you learn that Seron's mother runs Maxwell Frozen Foods, the brand famous for its bright red packaging. Frozen food is common even in an agricultural state like Raputoa because of its convenience.

Seron also explains that he is not from the Capital District, but the city of Weld, which requires an overnight journey by train.

You capitalize on the opportunity and ask him how he felt when he first came to the Capital District.

"I was 12 years old back then, and really excited to learn about the Capital District."

His impressions are similar to your own.

But Weld is a relatively developed city in its own right, so Seron explains that what surprised him were not the high-rises themselves, but the massive clusters of such buildings.

The degree of shock you experienced is different, as you are coming from a place with an unbroken horizon. How much something surprises you depends on what kind of knowledge and experience you already have. No one experiences the same degree of surprise.

You note down this thought so you can include it in your article.

The next day comes. It is the 12th. You talk with Larry.

Larry was born and raised in the Capital District, so he was always used to the big city.

He is from a renowned military family, and aims to one day become a soldier himself. He has loved the outdoors since childhood and is used to survival activities.

When you tell him that you are from a farm in the middle of the wilderness, he bombards you with questions. You feel a surge of pride when he mentions that he admires country living. Impressed, you make a note of this.

Larry continues asking about Raputoa, but one part stumps you.

"Lieutenant Colonel Walter McMillan's Operation Raputoa is famous, you know."

You are completely lost.

"Huh? Didn't they teach you about the Great War in history class?"

You have never heard of this Lieutenant Colonel Walter McMillan. You would remember if you had.

When you admit this to Larry, he falls silent for a moment. Then, “Huh. I was sure they’d teach you about him in Raputoa...”

The 13th. Megmica comes to the club office.

Nick is also there, but when he tells you he will be there tomorrow as well, you turn to Megmica.

You are curious to hear what Megmica—who has come from even further than you—thinks of the Capital District and the school. So you focus on such questions.

Megmica explains that she spent her first year in Roxche learning Roxchean from a private tutor, instead of going to school. She says she could not make many friends even after starting at the 4th Capital Secondary School.

She also tells you that she was constantly sad and homesick until she joined the chorus club.

Megmica found a place to be in the chorus club, but until she befriended a girl named Lillianne earlier this year, she had no one to chat with in classes.

And this summer, a series of coincidences led her to join the newspaper club. Now she has many friends and is enjoying every day in Roxche.

You realize that she had a much harder time than you.

“But looking back, they’re all just good memories. When I go back to Sou Be-II, I’ll treasure all the times I spent with my friends here. Everyone here is great!” Megmica exclaims quickly, her dark eyes sparkling. You are almost embarrassed to listen.

“Hm.” Larry shakes his head. “I didn’t get a word of that.”

Seron, who is studying Bezelese on his own, seems a little upset that he could only catch a few words here and there.

“Heh.” Jenny, who took Bezelese courses and understands much of your conversation, snorts sheepishly.

“You have even less time than me at the Capital District, but I hope you’ll enjoy your time here to the fullest.”

Speaking in her mother tongue, Megmica sounds like a totally different person. She reminds you of a kind, loving older sister. Which is not too off-base, as she is two years older than you and one year older than the rest of the club.

“Yes! It’s an honor to meet you and the others, SC Megmica,” you reply. And you begin to wonder if there is anything you could do for the newspaper club and Megmica.

On the 14th, you chat with Natalia.

Natalia likes talking about food above all else; she rambles at length about the gourmand’s life in the Capital District.

She tells you where to find the best restaurants, and what foods are only available in the Capital District. You learn a lot, although you won’t know how good the food she described is until you try them.

Natalia is particularly insistent on having you try the Capital District’s famous crisps.

“The point is, you *have* to have them fresh out of the fryer! You can’t say you’ve tried a Capital District crisp until you’ve bitten into a sizzling-hot piece right there in the store!” Natalia emphasizes, grabbing you by the shoulders.

You feel like she is about to devour you head-first. Natalia’s height makes her very intimidating at times like this.

“R-right...I’ll definitely try them while I’m in town this weekend.”

You make a note about trying fresh crisps, when Natalia asks you and Larry what you plan to do this weekend.

Upon speaking with the others throughout the week, you decided to visit everything you possibly could—from the Confederation Assembly Hall to the presidential residence, the Roxee Museum of Art, and the department store.

Natalia’s eye glints suspiciously.

“All right! I’ll take you to the best crisp place in town!”

On the 15th, you talk to Nick.

Today, Natalia is in the office, but Megmica is not.

Nick’s extraordinary beauty, you realize, is matched by the depth of his knowledge of history. Any question you have about the Capital District is answered with a response straight out of an encyclopedia. Raputoa’s curriculum covers very little of the founding of the Capital District. The teachers simply tell you, ‘the Capital District was designated a special area at the founding of Roxche’.

You learn for the first time today that the school sits on the site of an old village that was swallowed by the expansion of the Capital District.

Why was this area selected as the capital? How did the Capital District develop? What are the major issues currently plaguing the city?

Nick answers each question with eloquence as you jot down as much as you possibly can.

When Nick asks you where you plan to go tomorrow, you list off the places you wrote down.

“Mm. Excellent choices,” Nick says with a smile, but he seems a little miffed that he has nothing more to add to the list.

* * *

The 16th finally arrives.

It is your second weekend in the Capital District. You booked off today and tomorrow to enjoy all the Capital District has to offer. Unfortunately—

“We won’t be walking around in this weather,” Larry remarks upon arriving at the dorms at eight in the morning. It is pouring outside.

It was perfectly clear yesterday, but the sudden emergence of a low pressure system causes rain to fall almost sideways in the gust.

Umbrellas are no use in this weather. Larry, in fact, is wearing a military-issue poncho and waterproof motorcycling pants. Beneath that he is wearing cargo pants and a light sweater.

Seron is wearing beige pants and an expensive black jacket.

In your case, you are of the opinion that a day out entails dressing up in your best clothes—even if it is a weekend—which means you are once again in your uniform.

“Yeah, it happens sometimes this time of year,” Larry explains, “Makes you want to cry if you’re on a camping trip. We’re really careful about this kind of weather in the military. If you get drenched, in the worst-case scenario you could die of hypothermia.”

Your plan for today was to visit government offices, but the weather does not allow for such a thing.

“But our newbie doesn’t have a lot of time. Let’s try someplace else.”

Seron suggests a change of plans; a day-long tour of the Roxee Museum of Art.

The Roxee Museum of Art is the largest art museum in the Capital District and the Confederation. It is home to such a massive collection of works that not even a full day is enough to see them all. The museum was on your list of places to see.

Seron goes to a phone booth in the lobby and calls the others who are scheduled to come.

Jenny and Nick have no objections. They agree to meet at the entrance at 10, when the museum opens. Natalia and Megmica are supposed to be eating out with their families today. You wonder if they will be all right in this storm.

You take a taxi all the way to the museum. Seron and Larry cover the ride. The taxi comes all the way to the cargo entrance at the back of the dorms, preventing you from getting wet. It is technically against security regulations, but Seron says the guards let it slide at times like this. You note that this is the kind of knowledge only a dormitory resident would be privy to.

The taxi drives through the rain. The roads are nearly deserted.

This is your first taxi ride in the Capital District. The taxi is clean and the driver is dressed impeccably, as befitting the city.

You arrive at the Roxee Museum of Art.

The grounds are massive; the road continues even past the main gates, and beyond looms a majestic stone building. The entrance is in the middle, but you can barely make it out in the rain.

You are floored first by the museum’s size, then by its grandeur, then the number of visitors lining up for tickets in spite of the weather. There are over a hundred people in line, as far as you can count.

You begin to worry that, with so many people, the museum will be too crowded to enjoy properly.

“Don’t worry,” Seron reassures you, “it’s so big inside it’ll feel empty even with all these people.” Exactly how large is the museum, you wonder.

You pay for your ticket with the money from the Ministry of Education. Yours is a one-day pass, but the museum also offers eight-day and month-long passes as well.

Soon—

“Good morning everyone,” Nick says, arriving by taxi, “It certainly is raining cats and dogs today.”

Finally, Jenny arrives in a large luxury car with a pair of bodyguards, drawing much attention.

You do not know much about automobiles, but even you have heard of Jones Motors. Jenny is the daughter of the president, which almost doesn't surprise you considering what you have seen of her so far.

When the museum doors open, the visitors slowly disappear inside.

"Let's go on in, newbie," Larry says, "What do you feel like seeing? Seron's gonna give you a great tour."

You reply that you want to look at the paintings you saw in art class.

The museum is filled to the brim with classics and masterpieces you saw only in textbooks, although there is no literal danger of them spilling out.

"This way, then," Seron responds without even consulting the guidebook. He seems to have the museum's layout memorized.

You tour the museum for three hours, but according to the map you have seen less than 20 percent of the exhibits.

"It's a lot bigger than I thought. But I'm having a lot of fun," you say once you reach the museum restaurant.

The restaurant is encased in glass, just as beautiful as the artworks the museum houses. Rain continues to drum away at the window outside.

Around the large table sit Seron and the others. Your order is not yet ready.

The long walk has made you a little fatigued.

"Good to hear. You're not tired?" Larry asks. He does not seem tired at all, which is what you would expect from an aspiring career soldier.

"I'm all right."

You are used to walking as well. Back home, long walks are part of everyday life. You are still doing well.

"The exhibits are lovely as always, but I must say a trip here is always exhausting," Nick comments with a smile.

"I'm totally bushed. The food's gonna taste great," Jenny says. They both seem a little tired.

Seron looks calm, however.

"Seeing results?" Larry asks.

"I think so," Seron replied, "I'm feeling a lot better than before."

Confused, you ask them what they are talking about.

"I've been running these days," Seron replies tersely. Larry adds on.

"Seron realized just how out of shape he was on Orienteering Day last month, so he's been running almost every night since. Starting the day you arrived, actually. I was at the dorms because I was planning out a route for him."

"I see." "Huh." Nick and Jenny nod. It seems this is their first time hearing of this as well.

So that was why Larry suggested the beef stew at the dormitory cafeteria even though he lives at home. You finally understand.

"That sounds wonderful. You would be running on campus then, Seron?" Nick asks. Seron nods.

“Yeah. It’s lit up pretty brightly at night. I run before taking a bath or early in the morning. Larry’s set a pretty interesting course for me.”

“What’s it like?” asks Jenny.

“It involves a bunch of different exercises. I run slowly starting at the dorms, but I have to start sprinting on the track field. Then I have to hang from the horizontal bars by the grounds, run again, and do sit-ups on the grass. And other things too. It’s a lot more interesting than just running endlessly,” Seron replies.

It does sound interesting. Your walk to and from school—though a little different from exercising—involves an hour’s walk across farmland, and is the most boring thing in the world.

You often think how great it would be if you could listen to music as you walk. You once tried walking with a book in hand, but after you fell into the cornfields you decided not to try it again.

“It’s really rewarding to teach Seron. He’s hardworking and focused, and he does everything you tell him to do,” Larry says.

“Thank you for waiting.”

The waiter arrives with your food. He has a large platter on his right shoulder, supported by his right hand. In his left he has a folding cart for the platter.

First, he opens up the cart and places the platter atop it. Then he serves the dishes one after another. You have never seen this style of serving before.

Whoever came up with this system must have been very innovative, you think to yourself. As you note down the thought, Jenny snaps a photo.

Your meal is the most popular dish on the menu—the macaroni salad and fried chicken lunch.

It is much more expensive than eating out in Raputoa, but the money from the Ministry of Education covers the food.

The heaping helping of macaroni salad contains colorful vegetables like carrots and broccoli to spice up the visuals.

As for the fried chicken breast, the perfectly-fried batter seems to have been made with special spices. Your food also comes with clear consommé soup, a cup of tea, and a small scoop of ice cream for dessert.

It all looks and smells so good that you forget to ask Seron why he took up running after Orienteering Day.

After lunch, you continue your tour of the museum. Seron and Nick have explanations for all your questions, which makes the tour efficient because you do not have to stop to read the descriptions. You are happy that you get to see all the exhibits you have in mind.

At three in the afternoon, you step outside. The rain and wind have let up, giving you hope for good weather tomorrow.

“We’ll look at as many places as we can tomorrow. It’d be nice if we had a car,” Larry says.

“I’ll bring one. A van, so we’ll all fit in,” Jenny says without batting an eye.

At this point, even you understand that the luxuries afforded by the newspaper club are not owed to the 4th Capital Secondary School, but to Jenny’s incredible resources.

Jenny gives you a ride back in her luxury car. Inside, it feels like a parlor has been transplanted into a vehicle. You are floored.

You take many, many notes and even get a photograph taken with the car.

You say goodbye to the others at the gates and return to the dorms with Seron.

The rain stops. The western sky grows brighter, tinting your room a bright orange.

As you organize your notes, you remind yourself how fortunate you are to have joined the newspaper club.

But you keep feeling as though you are only receiving from the others without giving back anything in return. Isn't there anything you can do to help them?

* * *

The next day. The 17th.

It is a beautiful day. The morning sun makes it almost seem like yesterday's storm never happened.

It is cooler than yesterday and the tap water is cold, likely because the weather cleared up overnight.

Before breakfast, you look out the window of your familiar dormitory room.

“Ah...”

And you happen to spot Seron in the distance, running in his tracksuit on the deserted grounds. His breath is visible in the cold.

“He's really hardworking.”

You recall hearing that Seron has excellent grades.

And you begin to think—Seron is handsome and well-mannered. And if he becomes athletic as a result of his training, what *won't* he be able to do?

The plan is to meet at the gates at 10, so you leave the room with your notepad. Like yesterday, you are in your uniform, but you leave your coat because you do not get cold easily.

You run into Seron at the dormitory entrance. He is in a pair of jeans, a turtleneck shirt, and a jacket.

You came a little early because you did not want to cause trouble by being late, but it seems Seron thought the same thing.

You exchange greetings and walk together to the gates. Because Seron is so quiet, you decide to break the ice.

“This might sound like a strange question, but is there anything you're not good at, SC Seron? You seem to be an expert at everything.”

Seron thinks for a moment, then opens his mouth.

“Yeah. I can't say what it is yet, but...”

“But?”

“But right now, I’m fortunate enough to have a fighting chance even if I can’t achieve my goal yet. So I’m going to improve myself as much as I can—without pushing myself too hard—until I *can* reach that goal.”

After a short wait at the gates,

“Morning! Nice weather, huh?” Larry waves, arriving first.

Larry is always punctual. The sturdy-looking watch he always wears is probably there to help him with that habit. He seems to be dressed the same as yesterday, but upon closer inspection his sweater today is heavier.

“Morning, guys. Want something to chew on?” Natalia asks as she arrives. She looks good in pants thanks to her height. She is carrying a paper bag filled with cookies.

“What’s this?” Larry asks, peering inside.

“Made ‘em this morning. Hold your hands out, people. I’m distributing rations,” Natalia says, giving each person a fragrant chocolate chip cookie. The cookies are much bigger than the ones in stores, almost too large for the palm of your hand.

“This is huge! You bake, Lia?” Larry asks.

“There’s only one thing in the world I can’t do, and that’s making you smarter, Larry,” Natalia quips.

Everyone starts on their cookie. You take a bite.

It is crunchy on the outside and soft on the inside. The flavor of chocolate and butter spreads throughout your mouth and assures you that yes, this cookie is indeed delicious.

“It’s really good, Lia. But you sure we can eat these now?”

“Sure. I mean, you said yesterday that you’re buying all the crisps for the day—”

“I did not.”

“It’s really good, Nat. Thanks.”

“How ‘bout adding this to Maxwell Frozen Foods’ repertoire? I could sell you the recipe.”

“I’ll ask Mother.”

“It’s really good, SC Natalia. This is the best cookie I’ve ever had.”

“Aha! You know your stuff, newbie. There’s plenty more where that came from, so dig in and maybe you’ll get taller.”

You munch on more of Natalia’s cookies as you wait for the others. Nick and Megmica arrive at almost exactly the designated time.

Nick arrives by taxi, and Megmica by luxury car. He is in a neat half-coat, and she in a one-piece dress and a short jacket.

“It seems I made it on time after all. Good day, everyone.”

“I’m sorry! The roads were choked. Good morning.”

Natalia hands each of them a cookie.

“Thank you, Nat. It tastes wonderful.”

“Please teach later to me to make this cookie, Natalia.”

You munch on more cookies together, and a little past the meeting time Jenny arrives by car. She is in an outdoor jacket as though dressed for a hunting trip.

The van—a Jones Motors model, obviously—is large enough to seat 10. The driver-cum-bodyguard is, as with yesterday, Kurtz. Litner is also there.

“Sorry I’m late, guys,” Jenny apologizes, opening the door with a wave.

“Ah, chief. Here. This is a legendary cookie bestowed only to the greatest of heroes! Now, guide us all!” Natalia announces dramatically, holding out a cookie.

“What’s this?” Jenny asks, grabbing the cookie with her mouth. She takes hold of the rest after the first bite. “Not bad. It’s homemade, isn’t it?”

“How’d you know?”

“Obviously, you wouldn’t break even selling cookies with so much chocolate inside.”

You take notes like no tomorrow.

You and the newspaper club go from place to place by van, visiting one site and then rushing off to the next.

First you visit the presidential residence, the Confederation Assembly Hall, the supreme court, and the major government buildings at the center of the Capital District. Because it is a weekend, the traffic is not so bad.

Because the people in the buildings govern all of Roxche, they are as secure as they are majestic. Even as a tourist you must show ID at the entrance, and the police officers are armed with military-grade firearms.

“There was a fire in this building 140 years ago. One of the guards had used a fireplace to ward off the cold and failed to extinguish the fire properly. The interior was, unfortunately, completely gutted. But the building itself is sturdy in construction and made of stone, so it remained intact. Some traces of the great fire are preserved on the eastern wall—”

Nick’s explanations are as detailed as ever.

But you do not jot down his lecture. You can learn historical facts easily through independent research. You limit your notes to your impressions of what you see.

“Getting used to the city yet, newbie? Want a bite?” Natalia asks, looking off at the presidential residence.

In her hand is a hotdog with salted cabbage and pickles, which she bought at a stand in the park around the building. It looks delicious but you cannot possibly eat any more at the moment.

First, you politely decline the hotdog. “I’m not sure. But it definitely feels different from my first few days here,” you admit.

Like it or not, humans adapt to new environments. Which is why you have been taking notes so as to not forget how you felt before.

You make sure to note down, ‘Someday I’ll even get used to SC Natalia’s endless appetite’.

After touring the Confederation Library, you sit on a bench outside and gaze upon the building’s unusual structure.

“Now that I think about it,” Larry begins, “I’ve never actually gone on such an in-depth tour of the Capital District before.”

“Same.” Natalia nods. “I haven’t been to the Confederation Assembly Hall since they took us on a social studies trip in primary school five years ago. Can’t believe it’s still around.” She is, of course, joking—it is no surprise that the Confederation Assembly Hall still remains.

Nick also agrees, “Indeed. I would never tour this area unless we had guests from outside the city.”

Because the locals have lived here their whole lives, they end up not going to sites they can visit anytime.

The other tourists around you also seem to be from out of town, as they are smiling and exclaiming at everything they see.

“It’s so beautiful here. I almost want to pack up and move tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Let’s do our best to find work here.”

A couple passes by in front of you, full of hope for their future.

The couple passes, and—

“Have you ever heard of something called Capital Syndrome?” Seron says out of the blue. It is almost scary how he does that sometimes.

“What’s that?” “Seron, I do not like scary disease stories.” You and Megmica flinch at the term.

Is it a disease going around the Capital District? Is it contagious?

The others seem unaffected, meaning the disease is known to the locals. You wait for Seron to explain.

“You could call it an illness of the mind. It’s what happens when people who admire the capital and all it has to offer actually arrive, only to be terribly disappointed by the reality of the city. It’s a kind of culture shock.”

You nod in understanding.

“I know this feeling very well,” Megmica says, nodding again and again.

Natalia expands on the topic. “Some people think you’ll automatically have a cooler, better life in the Capital District. But people here don’t dress like models all the time. Even expensive old apartment buildings are crummy—elevators breaking all the time, angry old ladies next door, or loud brats on the floor above.”

“That is not all,” Nick adds, “Some people romanticize the winding old alleys of the Capital District, but many alleyways are filled with nothing but garbage and feral cats. It’s even more difficult for car owners, as finding parking space is nearly impossible. They say it is local custom to rub bumpers in parking lots, but that is simply an unwanted result of the lack of parking space. Traffic is terrible every day of the year, and costs of living are probably the most expensive in Roxche.”

Even Larry has things to add. “Human relationships are the worst in Roxche, too. It’s hard to make friends in a bustling place like this, and even harder to find people to find someone to really have a heart-to-heart with.”

They are taking no prisoners. The locals can only say such things because they live here, you realize. It makes sense that those who harbor delusions about the city would end up disillusioned by its realities.

“It makes sense. But I don’t think I’ll be around long enough to be disappointed,” you admit.

“Hearing everyone’s stories, I am relieved, I think,” Megmica says gravely, “Because I did not come alone, and I did not come for admiring. I am very relieved in many ways.”

She is right. For Megmica, Roxche is a completely foreign land. She is only here because her parents are here, and she is with her family. That must be what gives Megmica comfort.

This might not be appropriate material for the article, but you note it down anyway. Megmica is also writing something in her notepad.

Jenny snaps a photo of you and Megmica together and speaks up.

“Should we move on, then?”

“Where to next, chief?”

“The place you’ve all been waiting for. Lunch!”

“Yessss!” Natalia swoons, clasping her hands together. She has been eating all morning without pause—what in the world does her digestive system look like?

“The restaurant’s a little ways off, but I guarantee it’s good. We might be in for heavy traffic so go to the bathroom now if you have to,” Jenny instructs.

“Oh, I’ll do that.”

You are the only person to raise their hand.

“It’ll be a while before Kurtz brings the car around; take your time.”

You head to the nearest bathroom—the one by the Confederation Library entrance.

After you finish your business, you walk out through the lobby with the high ceiling when someone calls to you.

“Excuse me.”

You turn to find a man in his mid-to-late thirties.

He is in a navy suit and wearing a pair of rimless glasses, and looks very calm and gentle.

The man does not seem suspicious—he comes off as a scholar more than anything else.

Appearances are not everything, however. For all you know, this man might be a skilled assassin with multiple kills under his belt.

But more importantly, whatever question the man has is probably not something a tourist like you could answer. You feel a little sorry for him, but you must reply.

“Yes, what is it?”

“That’s a Raputoan uniform, isn’t it,” the man comments. “I’m terribly sorry. It surprised me so much to see the uniform here I called out to you without thinking.”

You are floored.

How does he know? For a moment you are stunned, but you quickly remember the flag on your sleeve. You swell a little with pride. “Yes! I’m a short-term exchange student sponsored by the Republic of Raputoa. I’m studying at a secondary school here for the month.”

The man’s eyes widen slightly.

“That sounds wonderful. Actually, I once lived in Raputoa.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I recognize the Ministry of Education’s emblem. How nostalgic.”

That is enough to convince you that the man is telling the truth.

The Ministry of Education's emblem is not only on your uniform, but on the car that drove you to the airport from your hometown, and on all school property. Every Raputoan citizen knows the emblem. But few people recognize it outside Raputoa.

You cannot tell how long the man might have lived in Raputoa, but it must have been a long time ago if he feels nostalgic about it.

"Raputoa probably hasn't changed much in the past few years, except for in the bigger cities. You should come back to visit someday," you suggest earnestly.

"Thank you. I sincerely hope I'll get the chance," the man replies, just as earnestly. "Sorry to bother you. I must be keeping you from your group."

"Oh, right. It was nice meeting you."

You turn and walk away from the bespectacled man.

You do not know his name, and you do not know what kind of life he has led. You will never see him again, barring a miracle.

And yet it makes you very happy to meet someone in the Capital District who knows of your homeland. You may not be able to write about this in your article, but you decide to tell your family and friends about it once you get home.

* * *

"Finally, lunch!" Natalia cheers.

You are in a luxurious restaurant a little outside the city center.

"Easy there, Lia. You're not eight anymore," Larry scolds her. Natalia is indeed acting a little childish.

The restaurant is nearly full, its patrons mostly dressed to impress. Clearly rich ladies and gentlemen.

You see no one else around your age, but the rest of the newspaper club shows no reservations about being here. Because they behave like they belong, you manage to not be completely overwhelmed.

You and the rest of the newspaper club sit around a long table, eyes on the dishes being served.

Salads arranged to perfection and veal steak topped with foie gras of the same size. Steaming-hot bread straight out of the oven. Fresh-squeezed juice.

To top it all off, the food is all served on expensive white ceramic plates. The plates seem to shine with quality.

It all reminds you that this is indeed a high-end Capital District restaurant. The dishes, the food, everything is marvelous. The dormitory cafeteria was impressive enough, but this goes above and beyond anything you have eaten at school.

"Let's eat. Gotta keep ourselves going," Larry says. Everyone takes a moment to pray before their meal. Larry and Megmica take the longest, lifting up very earnest prayers.

You dig in.

You are not used to such luxurious food, but everything is delicious. You scarf down the food with as much grace as you can muster.

Then you think about the price and shudder.

You followed Jenny into the restaurant, and when she asked you if there was anything you couldn't eat, you said there was not. Then she ordered the special for everyone—without once mentioning the bill.

You did not use much of your allowance since coming to the Capital District, but you want to at least set some aside to get souvenirs for friends and family.

You hope this meal will not cost you half your spending money.

“Er, SC Jenny?”

“Yeah?” Jenny replies, tearing a warm piece of bread in two.

“Isn’t this place supposed to be very expensive?”

“It is.”

“Ah—”

“But it’s all free. So don’t hold back.”

“Huh? Why?”

“You’ll see,” Jenny says, spreading butter on the bread and popping it into her mouth before it can melt.

You stare, dumbfounded, when someone calls out.

“Jenny!”

A man in his fifties raises his voice loud enough to almost disturb the other patrons.

He is short and very overweight, his bulges threatening to tear his vest.

The man reminds you of the kindly middle-aged men back home. You feel a little homesick.

As the other patrons and the rest of the newspaper club watch in shock, the man approaches Jenny. Jenny wipes her mouth with a napkin.

“It’s been so long, little princess! How are you?” he cries, pulling her into a tight hug.

“Ack! It’s been a while, Manager,” Jenny struggles to reply in his arms.

You and the others finally understand the situation. The Manager knows Jenny, which is why the food is free.

“Aye, it’s been half a year now! Glad you came in to visit!” His large hand slaps Jenny on the back again and again. “Have you gotten smaller?”

“You’re still as big as ever, Manager. You might die if you don’t get yourself fixed up—unless you’re hoping to become foie gras yourself?”

“Of course not. I plan to live long enough to see you marry, Jenny. I can’t rest until I make you the perfect wedding cake. So do find yourself a good man and marry soon. Let me rest in peace.”

“Aw, shut up, Manager. It’s gonna be a long while, you know.”

They seem to have known each other for a very long time.

“You should visit more often, little princess. I’ll fatten you right up.”

“I don’t wanna look like you, Manager.”

The exchange goes on briefly, but Jenny finally gets to the point.

“Manager, these are my friends from school.”

Then she introduces everyone, one after another.

The manager is outgoing and personable, and holds nothing back. His conversation with Seron says it all.

“Ah! Maxwell Frozen Foods, you say? Please do tell your mother that she’s going to drive me out of business with frozen food that good!”

“Of course. I’ll make sure to tell her to step up her products, now that the manager of one of the Capital District’s foremost restaurants is praising her.”

You wish you could respond so courteously without missing a beat.

“Gah ha ha ha! Take good care of Jenny!” the manager says, then thanks the other patrons as he departs.

“How do you know him, chief?” Natalia asks, having at some point finished her food.

“He used to be our family’s personal chef.”

“Ah, I get it.”

Jenny tells you about the manager.

Recognized for his skills, the manager worked as a chef with the Jones family for a long time. But he cast aside his stable job and sought independence.

Rather than oppose his departure, Jenny’s father supported his endeavors fully.

Four years ago, the Jones family gave the manager full financial support to establish his own restaurant. The business was a success, and the manager came to run two additional branches and even a cooking school.

Even after successfully paying back his debt, the manager remained faithful to the family. He swore that he would provide free food to any member of the Jones family indefinitely, no matter when they came to one of his restaurants.

“So eat to your heart’s content, guys. More steak, Nat?”

“Yeah! And the foie gras here is so good! Jenny, can we come here for meetings from now on?” Natalia demands jokingly, eyes glinting.

“Could I get seconds on the steak here too?” Larry asks.

Seron and Megmica ask for more bread, and Nick more salad. You ask for a half-serving of steak.

“I’m so glad I joined this club,” Natalia sighs. Internally, you nod.

As you feast on your incredible meal, you realize that the rich people of the Capital District are not rich simply because they worked hard.

They gained their riches by treasuring their connections with other people. You note down the thought.

And as though reading your mind, Jenny says,

“I grew up surrounded by some of the nicest adults in the world. And that’s a fact.”

After stuffing yourself all the way through dessert, you and the others resume the tour.

The afternoon itinerary involves touring the Capital West Station area.

You have always wanted to visit the massive train station and the massive department store around it.

“The crisps, too,” Natalia says.

“Yes, that too,” you reply.

First, you look around the station.

Seron takes on the role of guide, being familiar with the station thanks to his trips to and from home.

The station is just the way you remember from the photographs—a veritable fortress. A massive glass dome the size of a stadium covers over 10 platforms from high up in the air.

It certainly is nice to have a roof to keep the weather out, but you still must wonder if the sheer height of the ceiling is warranted. A lower ceiling would cost less and be easier to build. What were the architects thinking, you ask out loud.

“They left some room overhead just in case the railways develop further and they need more platforms. They can’t widen the station property itself because of the surrounding buildings, but with a high ceiling they can build second- and third-story platforms overhead,” Seron explains.

“Wow...that’s amazing,” you exclaim. It feels as though your eyes have been opened. The architects must have been looking 10, maybe 100 years into the future when they came up with this design. You open up your notepad as you reflect on your stance.

People bearing heavy pieces of luggage rush past. You might be swept away in the flow of people if you stand around aimlessly. It is much more crowded than the airport.

“Right now it’s on the empty side, though,” says Seron, “You’ll see a lot more people during rush hour. And during the holidays, there are so many travelers you can barely walk.”

You cannot imagine such a large building filling up with people. You are almost overwhelmed.

Afterwards, you get to see, jot down notes about, and take photos of the massive clock and its hammer-shaped pendulum, the long platforms lying parallel to one another, and many other features of the station.

“To be truthful, I am coming first into this station too,” Megmica says, also enjoying the tour.

Megmica says she came to Roxche by ship; it was a long 20-day journey across the North Sea, followed by an entire day’s train ride.

“Really? Newbie, you came by aeroplane, right? That’s not cheap, you know. Anyone here ever flown before?” Larry asks. Natalia alone raises her hand.

You are surprised that Jenny does not raise her hand, but she says she mostly travels by car.

Natalia grins. “Oh dear. So me and the newbie are the only ones who’ve managed to beat gravity and soar through the sky. Let’s go over there and leave all these squares behind, newbie.”

“That’s enough, Lia. Newbie, you don’t have to play along.”

Natalia says she visited the Kingdom of Iks with her family over the summer. You are pleasantly surprised.

The Kingdom of Iks is a mountain country located in the Central Mountain Range, southwest of Raputoa.

Natalia says her family took a sleeper train and a bus on the way there because they had some business at another city, but took an aeroplane on the way back.

“You might have passed through Elitèsà, then,” you say. There are only two roads into Iks, and Elitèsà is at the entrance to one of them.

“Oh, yeah. I think so. That sounds about right.”

“I knew it. -- Elitèsà is a big city on the southern tip of Raputoa,” you explain.

“So that’s another thing we have in common! Let’s go over there and leave all these squares behind—”

“You didn’t even know the city was in Raputoa until now,” Larry cuts in.

“Jealous, Larry?”

“No.”

Megmica speaks up. “Er...are flying aeroplanes not scary?”

“Not at all,” you answer, “The engine is a bit loud, but it was very fun.”

“Mhm. It just zoomed through the air and landed smoothly. It’s way better than traveling by train,” Natalia adds.

“But...but if the aeroplane falls...you might fall.”

“Yes, but...”

Megmica has a point. But you think to yourself—if you worry about crashing, you would never be able to board an aeroplane. And you simply cannot give up the conveniences it offers, money permitting.

“What’s wrong, Megmica? Gonna fly somewhere?” Natalia asks.

“Yes. It is yet not certain, but at the winter break at the end of the year I may for the first time in two years visit to my homeland.”

“I see.”

“If we go on a very fast aeroplane, they say it takes about two days to go to my hometown. So my family will. But I said it was too scary.”

You can see where Megmica’s family is coming from. If they take the same aeroplane as the one you took to the Capital District, they could reach Raputoa in a day and then transfer to a Westbound flight.

Maybe she will indeed end up stopping at Raputoa along the way, and maybe she will be able to visit. But—

“If the engine breaks, can I fix the engine?” Megmica asks in a panic, giving you no time to say anything. Her face looks paler than usual.

Seron seems to want to say something. He must be thinking of ways to reassure her—recite statistics about the low failure rates, or describe emergency landing protocol.

But someone beats him to the punch.

“Don’t worry about it. If that happens, I’ll just hop right up and fix it. Being tall has its advantages,” Natalia says.

Even someone as mechanically challenged as you can see she is lying through her teeth. Larry’s expression agrees with you.

“Really?” Meg says, “it is a relief.”

Seriously? You stare at Megmica in disbelief. You glance over and see Seron standing silently. Though his expression is blank, it feels as though he is thinking the same thing as you.

You leave the station and enter the department store across the street.

“The gorilla’s place, eh?” Natalia comments. You have no idea what she is talking about, but you miss your chance to ask. Is there a gorilla living in the department store? The Capital District is full of mysteries.

The department store itself seems to you like a magic castle.

The biggest store you have seen in your life was the local shopping district. The department store, in contrast, is a whopping eight stories tall.

"It feels like someone just gave me a chimney saying it was a cob of corn," you say.

"Excellent analogy," Nick chuckles. You continue to struggle with the shock.

You wonder if all these products on display really will be bought. You can only imagine they will remain unsold on the shelves for a year or two, gathering dust. A clothing store you frequent back home, you recall, has had the dame duffel coat on display for the past four years.

When you share your concerns with the others, Jenny replies nonchalantly, "Don't worry about it. All the products get sold and replaced or restocked every month or so."

"Oh...really?"

You continue to look around at the countless items for sale, marveling at the sheer quantity.

"This is all so expensive."

You almost feel dizzy at some of the prices.

Meanwhile, the others are enjoying the trip as well.

"Ooh, nice hat. I bet it'll look good on you, Megmica."

"It is very nice. I almost want it. I will next time ask my mother and father to buy it."

A few minutes later—

"Chief! Buy me that camera!"

"What are you, eight? No."

"C'mon, please?"

"You already have two."

"True.

A few minutes after that—

"Why not buy some new gloves for the winter, Seron? Larry? Do last year's gloves still fit you?"

"Hm. You have a point."

"Maybe I should."

From the way the others do their shopping, you realize how different you are from them. It is not a good or a bad difference.

Just like you, the students at the 4th Capital Secondary School struggle with their studies and have fun with their friends.

And some things you simply do not have in common.

You make a note of the thought. 'People do not necessarily have to all be the same'.

You end up buying inexpensive and lightweight things like postcards, maps, and magazines for the people back home. That should be enough for everyone. You will also buy several items marked with the school emblem at the campus store later.

By the time you leave the department store, it is already evening. The glowing red sky is just as beautiful as yesterday.

But you still have one more thing to do.

“You can’t say you’ve been to the Capital District till you’ve tried these babies!” Natalia insists, taking you to a crisp store in the area.

“You can get these everywhere in the Capital District, but the place in front of Capital West Station makes ‘em best! Willing to take objections, though!”

The long lineup at the store is testament to its popularity. You also wait in line for the famed snack.

You have never seen such crisps before. Each piece of fried dough is about five centimeters in size, looking like a cross between a cookie and a doughnut.

Some packs on display are still sizzling-hot. The paper bags they are sold in absorb the grease.

“All right! Give it a try!” Natalia says. You reach into the bag and pick up a piece.

“Hm?”

The texture on your fingers feels strange. There is some sort of a powder sprinkled on the crisp—you cannot tell if it is sugar or salt.

You slowly bring it to your mouth and take a bite—

“Ah...”

The taste spreads in an instant.

Though it is not spicy or sweet, the intense flavor fills your mouth and forces your lips to purse. But once you bite down, the flavor recedes.

“Ahh...”

You put the rest of the crisp into your mouth. You savor the taste again with a funny look on your face. Jenny takes a snapshot of the moment.

“Well? Well?” Natalia asks. You cannot lie to her.

“It’s really strong. But...I think I might get addicted to this.”

“Right? Here, have some more!” Natalia cheers.

You look around and see the others eating as well. Megmica is holding four bags of the stuff.

“My younger brothers, no, my family all loves this crisp very much. I will gift them to them.”

Nick chimes in, licking his fingers, “They’re not suitable for eating daily, but on those occasions when you do treat yourself it’s difficult to stop before you finish the bag.”

Seron is also eating blankly.

“Man, it’s good. Whoever came up with this powder is a genius,” Larry says, looking at you. Your eyes meet just as you reach into the bag Natalia holds out.

“I love it,” you say. Larry grins.

“Welcome to the Capital District!”

That, you decide, will be the title of your article.

Surrounded by high-rises, the sounds of countless passing cars, and rich kids around your own age, you indulge in the deep-fried crisps together.

You will probably never have an opportunity like this again.
When the realization hits, you look up at the sky again.
The dusk-tinted sky is as clear as it can be.

* * *

You start on your article the very next day.
Referring to your notes, you begin writing in your notebook.
You would fall behind immediately if you write in class, so you use the short time you have after school to write in the newspaper club office.

“Working hard, eh?”

Even when you do nothing but write, Larry serves you tea and Seron looks up from his book to help you clear up some facts.

You begin to wonder if you deserve this sort of treatment. But—

“Don’t worry about it,” Seron says immediately.

“Wanna try using this?” Jenny asks, pointing to a brand-new typewriter sitting on one of the desks. But because it looks like it’ll take you a full day to learn to use it, you decline.

From the 18th to the 22nd, you spend every day after school at the club office. You write as if you are doing homework for composition class.

But because you cannot write too much, Jenny cuts content all the readers are expected to know, leaving behind only your personal impressions. As your sentences are cut one after another, the article becomes more and more dense with information.

In the end, the finished article is composed of two parts—your impressions of the Capital District and the things it has to offer, and your impressions of the school and student life.

“Not bad. I like it,” Jenny says. At the end of your five-day journey—after school on the 22nd—you finally finish. You put down your pen, glad and satisfied.

“Oh, almost forgot.”

After club activities that day, Jenny hands you four bundles of photographs, each the size of a notepad. There are over a hundred photos altogether, which weigh quite a bit in a pile.

The photos are of the Capital District, the newspaper club, and you, amidst it all. You are surprised to see that over half the photographs are in full color.

“I want you to pick four or five to use in the article. Tell me the numbers on the back of the ones you want.”

Jenny has already chosen the photo for the headliner—the funny face you made as you at the Capital District crisp for the first time. It is a bit—or rather, very—embarrassing, but because everyone agrees it is very appropriate for the article, you cannot object.

You are happy to be allowed to choose the rest of the photos, however.

“All right. Should I give you the numbers by tomorrow?”

“Sure. You can take the photos to the dorms.”

You write on your notepad, ‘Pick five sample photos by the 23rd and return all photos to Jenny’.

To be honest, you really want the photos for yourself.

You want to take them home to show the others. It would make explaining things so much easier. A picture is worth a thousand words, after all.

But you do not dare to ask. Film and photo paper are expensive—especially with color photographs.

Swallowing the disappointment, you finish writing your reminder—when Jenny nonchalantly comments,

“And tell me the numbers of any photos you want to take home. They’re yours.”

“What...?” you gasp, hands trembling. “A-are you sure?”

“One newspaper isn’t going to make much of a keepsake, don’t you think?” Jenny says dismissively.

“But...I—”

You have nothing to give her in return, you want to say. But you are cut off.

“Don’t worry about it, newbie!” Larry assures you from across the room, washing the teapot, “Think of it as promotional material for the Capital District, the school, and the newspaper club!”

“But...” you trail off again, but Seron joins in as well.

“Take them to remember us by. I would want these photos if I were in your shoes, so I think you should take them. I would have asked Jenny if she hadn’t offered.”

Nick, who happens to be at the office today, nods beside you. “Indeed. We’ve had such a good time together. It would be a shame for you to lose these wonderful memories.”

You can no longer decline. You rise from your seat.

“Thank you, everyone! I promise I’ll take good care of the photos—and the memories we all made!”

* * *

The end of the week. Lunchtime on the 23rd.

“How was the newspaper club?” the advisor asks.

“It was the best!” You reply, beaming, “Everyone was very nice to me. I’m having a very good time with them.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” the advisor replies with a smile.

If he didn’t suggest that you join a club, you never would have met the newspaper club members. You owe the advisor so much.

You resolve to never forget the advisor—the Roxchean teacher named Mark Murdoch.

Part 4: Your Job

“And? And then what happened?”

It is the 4th day of the twelfth month.

You are back at your home school in Raputoa for the first time in one month. Naturally, your return is the talk of the school. Everyone’s eyes were on you during the morning assembly.

“I helped make this newspaper in the Capital District,” you said at the assembly, unfolding the newspaper. Now it is in a glass case, displayed in front of the headmaster’s office.

You left one of the two copies you have at home, so you cannot show your article to your classmates.

So instead, you show them photographs as you explain your trip.

It is supposed to be social studies class, but even the teacher is more interested in your story than the lesson. “How did the students there like the article?”

It seems you will be switching places with the teacher today.

“After I finished the article, we printed the papers on the 24th and 25th. Dozens of them. There were so many copies,” you describe, taking the story to its climax.

* * *

After school on the 26th, you arrived at the club office and came face-to-face with a copy of the newspaper.

A newspaper with your photo on it, and an article by you. You had never seen such a thing before.

You stared silently for some time and fell deep into thought. The rest of the newspaper club waited for you to finish thinking.

“Thank you,” you finally said, looking up.

“All right. Let’s go post ‘em,” Larry said, and the group split into two.

You, Seron, Megmica, and Jenny took the south side of campus, posting the papers in places where they did not cover any other posted materials or hurt the appearance of the space. The others told you that before it was officially recognized, the club had to post newspapers guerilla-style and the teachers would tear them down.

After posting all of the newspapers, you returned to the office.

“Good work. Here, you can take these home with you,” Jenny said, handing you two rolled-up copies of the newspaper.

* * *

“Jenny sounds like a really cool person,” one of your friends remarks.

“Well, I guess,” you reply.

“Hey, why’re *you* getting all embarrassed?” Everyone laughs.

You laugh with them, but a part of you feels very lonely.

You are no longer part of the newspaper club. All you can see outside the window is the horizon. You are once again an ordinary student in the Republic of Raputoa.

If only you could put down these sentiments in writing and publish them in a newspaper.
And if only you could send that newspaper to the Capital District. But that is currently impossible—you do not know if it will ever be possible.

So right now, you do what you can.
You tell your friends the whole story.
“I went to school the next day, and—”

* * *

When you went to school on the 27th, many people came up to talk to you. Both in the halls and in the classrooms.

“Hey, you’re the exchange student from Raputoa, right? I really liked your article.”
“How’s the capital treating you? Isn’t it great? That picture of you eating the crisp was really nice.”

“It was interesting to see what someone from another state thinks of us.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying the Capital District.”

“Th-thank you!”

Each time, you thanked them profusely.

You were so happy. Like a village of strangers had suddenly become your family.

When you arrived at the club office, Seron, Larry, Jenny, Megmica, Natalia, and Nick—the whole club—greeted you with smiles.

“You’re a regular celebrity now.”

“Good going, newbie!”

“You might be more useful than these lugs here.”

“You did very good work!”

“Nothing like some crisps to spice up the newspaper.”

“I’m sure the newspaper will be a wonderful memento of your time here.”

You tried very hard to not break the happy atmosphere, straining to hold back the tears.

On the next day—the 28th—things had been reversed, and it was your turn to answer questions from the newspaper club.

Everyone but Natalia and Megmica was gathered in the office.

“I’d like to hear about your homeland,” Seron suggested, and the others joined in as well.

“Feel free to ask me anything!”

You answered their questions until the sun went down.

It made you very happy to convey even one more thing about your motherland to the Capital District.

The 29th was your last day at the 4th Capital Secondary School.

Your classes were finished. Each and every one of them had been worth taking.

In each of your classes, the teachers presented you with a special report card. As per program rules, you would take back the report cards to Raputoa.

As you expected, you had not done quite as well as in Raputoa, but—
“We’ve never had a short-term exchange student perform so well,” the teachers all said.
“Thank you!”

You received the report cards, brimming with pride.

After thanking and saying goodbye to the headmaster, you hurried to the newspaper club.
You wanted to spend as much time as you could with the members, as it was your final day there.

You knocked on the door for the last time, and found the six members waiting.

“Come on in!”

The table was laden with cakes, each one intricately designed. A strawberry shortcake, a mille crepe, a sachertorte with whipped cream. On the empty boxes news to them was the name ‘Sears Patisserie’.

“Wh-what is all this?” you asked incredulously.

“It is a goodbye party. It is very lonely, but it will be good to say goodbye brightly,” Megmica replied.

“Sit down already,” Natalia ordered, playing her violin like the talented musician she was.

“Don’t make Lia wait too long,” Larry advised, brewing tea, “she might gobble up all the cakes.”

“We’ve ordered these from our favorite patisserie,” Nick said nonchalantly.

“You’ve only been here for a couple of weeks, but you were a great club member. So enjoy your party,” Jenny said, taking a photograph.

“Here. Take a seat.” Seron, ever the gentleman, offered you the best seat.

You looked around at the 4th Capital Secondary School’s newspaper club.

* * *

“Oh shoot! Did you cry, Cappie?”

“I did not! I held back.”

“So you almost did!”

Surrounded by your friends’ laughter, you think again—

That whether you are here or in the capital, you are surrounded by the most wonderful people in the world.

“So what happened after that? Keep going, Cappie!”

You continue.

“And then—”

* * *

The party in the office seemed to end in the blink of an eye.

You were not leaving until the afternoon of the next day, but because you would be busy signing out and taking care of last-minute business, you would not be going to classes or visiting the club. You said goodbye to everyone but Seron at the gates.

The sunset was beautiful.

Would you ever get the chance to see these people again, you wondered sadly. Then you looked up. Life would go on. Though you did not know what the future held in store, you knew that your attitude could make a difference. There was no use being pessimistic. Right now, the best you could do was say goodbye with a smile.

“Take care of yourself, yeah? May the gods smile on the Republic of Raputoa and its people,” Larry said with a salute.

“Come back and have some more crisps!” Natalia said, putting a hand on your shoulder.

“You were a most excellent student of Capital District history. An A+ for you,” Nick said, becoming the last of the Capital District teachers to give you a report card.

“Give me a call if you’re ever in town again.” Jenny said, handing you a note with her telephone number on it. In a corner of the note was scribbled the words, ‘Call me at 8 tonight. Don’t tell the others’.

You did not know what she was planning, but decided to obey. You slipped the note into your pocket.

“I hope you’ve made a lot of great memories here. Remember, if the engine breaks, do your best to fix it,” Megmica advised gravely.

Holding back tears, you watched everyone disappear beyond the gates and finally turned to Seron.

“I’m so glad you’re here, SC Seron. I would have felt so lonely if I were alone right now.”

You walked with him back to the dorms.

The magnificent campus buildings, the field dotted by sports clubs finishing up activities, and the forest of apartment buildings beyond, all glowing orange in the sunset—it would probably be the last time you saw this scene.

Slowly, you walked.

Seron silently matched your pace.

* * *

“They all sound like such good people!” one friend remarks. You nod proudly.

“Why are *you* acting all proud? Never mind. Anyway, it looks like you never managed to do anything in return for them.”

“That’s not exactly true.”

“Really? It sounds to me like it was all one-sided.”

You reply, “There was one really important job at the end that no one else could do.”

* * *

You had your last meal at the dormitory cafeteria with Seron.

Until then, you had not gone out of your way to eat together because you each had your own preferred study and bath times, but for the final meal you decided to coordinate.

The menu that day was hamburg steak marinated in special sauce. The sweet carrots and demi-glace sauce on the side were mouth-watering.

You recalled that everything at the school cafeterias had been delicious. For a moment you hated your tongue for perceiving the great flavors, as you would not be able to eat such foods again.

The next day, you would be very busy all day. You said goodbye to Seron after dinner.

“Take care. Contact me if you ever get to visit Weld or the Capital District. You’re welcome anytime,” Seron said at the lobby as you parted ways.

As you watched him depart, the question that had been on your mind the whole time since you first joined the newspaper club came back to you. The thought bobbed to the surface again and again.

Wasn’t there anything you could do for the newspaper club to pay back their kindness?

You fell into thought, standing alone in the lobby.

You could not think of anything, however. You supposed the debt was meant to be paid someday in the far-off future. The thought depressed you.

Afterwards, you headed to a phone booth to solve the mystery of Jenny’s note. The booths were quite crowded even so late in the evening.

Luckily, you spotted some empty booths and stepped inside one of them.

After a brief wait, you called the number at eight on the dot. Jenny soon picked up.

<Hey there, newbie.>

“G-good evening, SC Jenny. Is this your personal telephone?”

<No, I’m just borrowing it. Anyway, give me the number of the phone you’re using right now. I’ll call you back.>

You did as you were told and hung up. Just as you picked up the change, Jenny called you back.

* * *

“So which one’s SC Jenny?” Your friend asks, so you point her out in a photograph.

The photo was taken by Litner the bodyguard in front of the Confederation Library. This is the only one featuring all seven of you, so you tell your friend to be careful with it.

“The short girl right here. She’s the chief.”

“Aha. So what did she want with you? You said it was an important job?”

“Yeah. She said—”

* * *

<I’ve got one last job for you, newbie.>

“R-really? Yes! I’ll do anything I can!”

<I like your attitude. But first, is Seron Maxwell around right now?>

You raised your eyebrow, but you soon remembered the note and replied, “No, he’s not. And the booths on either side of me are empty too.”

<Good. Then here is your order.>

What was she planning, you gulped.

<Write a letter to Strauski Megmica.>

“Huh? what do you—”

<I want you to write a letter to Strauski Megmica. As soon as possible.>

“R-right. A letter. Sure, I can do that. But what do I write?”

You were taken off-guard. You were planning to write to everyone after you returned to Raputoa.

<See, we've had a problem in our club ever since it was founded in the summer.>

“What is it?” You gulped again. Jenny disclosed the truth.

<Seron is in love with Megmica.>

“Really? A-are you sure?”

<One hundred percent. C'mon, you spent the last two weeks with us and didn't notice?>

You spent 10 whole seconds rewinding. But—

“No, I didn't.”

<I suppose Seron can be hard to read with that stony face of his. But—>

“But?”

<He sometimes ends up doing the most dorky things because of her. You heard about how he's started running recently, right?>

“Yes.”

<Well, he's doing that because of what happened at the orienteering competition we had last month. Seron got tired and fell behind before Megmica, and she had to pull him along by the hand at the end. It must have bothered him.>

“I see...”

<He probably wanted to make a better impression on her, that shy idiot. And now he's struggling to make up for what he thinks was an unsightly display. For being so handsome and smart, he sure is a moron.>

Jenny was harsh. But you could not get angry at her on Seron's behalf. You had to hear her out to the end.

“So why do you need me to write to SC Megmica?”

<I want you to tell her something.>

“Y-you can't mean, ‘beware of Seron’?!?” you whispered harshly.

<Calm down, newbie. I mean the opposite.>

“You mean...”

<Just tell her, ‘I think SC Seron likes you’.>

“What?”

She wanted you to confess Seron's feelings in his stead.

“I-is that really all right? I feel so bad for SC Seron...”

<Hmph. I knew you would say that.>

“I think most people would agree with me.”

<And you're right. But Seron is such a chicken,> Jenny said mercilessly, <so he'll never come out and say it. I can tell.>

“You really think so?” you managed to respond. But you were inclined to agree.

<At this rate, Seron's gonna make zero progress before graduation. I don't know what Megmica's planning afterwards, but what if she ends up going back to Sou Be-II for university?>

"You're right."

<So I ask you this, newbie,> Jenny said gravely, <would you just leave Seron floundering the way he is now?>

"What? I..."

Things were not all right as they were. With that in mind, you came to an answer.

If Seron was in love with Megmica, he should tell her. If things worked out, then that was wonderful—if not, he would spend some time in misery but soon move on with life.

You replied, taking care so as not to be quite so blunt.

"No. I don't think I should."

<There's no beautiful, glorious future in store for an idiot who sits around just being happy that he gets to be in the same club as his crush. Don't you think?>

"Right."

<Yeah. If he's in love, he should be honest and say he is. I'm not saying he should shout it from the rooftops. And there definitely needs to be something like a friendship before he tells her. But he's just sitting on his hands now, being too shy to confess! That's just complacent. If he loses her because he doesn't act, he deserves it!>

Jenny was getting angry, though you couldn't tell if the anger was directed at Seron or someone else. It sounded almost as though she had made the same mistake herself.

"I see."

<Nat and Nick agree with me, by the way.>

"Do they know too?"

<Obviously. Larry does too, cause Seron told him. Megmica's the only one who doesn't. I don't know if that's because she's too dense or sensitive, or because she assumes a handsome guy like Seron would never fall for her. It's gotta be one of those three.>

"Do the others know about your plan, SC Jenny?" you asked.

<No.>

"Then maybe you could consult—"

<No.> Jenny cut you off.

"Why not?"

<Look. I think Nat, Nick, and Larry feel the same way I do, to a certain extent. And they'd push for this plan if I told them. But what if they don't? And more importantly—>

"Yes?"

<Suppose the worst happens. As long as I'm the only one who planned this, everyone will get mad at me. I'm the only one in the Capital District who'll have to take their anger face-to-face.>

You understood what she meant. "So you're saying that I'm in the right position to take up that role, since I'm leaving tomorrow?"

It was a very harsh order. These people who helped you for the past two weeks could end up hating you from halfway across the continent for a very long time because of your actions.

<Yeah,> Jenny paused, and continued, <so I need your help, newbie.>

She was serious.

<And this is just my intuition, but...>

“Yes?”

<I don’t think Megmica dislikes Seron at all. If he asked her out, she wouldn’t turn him down, at least not immediately. She would at least take some time to think it over.>

“Th-that would be wonderful, but what if she says she doesn’t like a guy who can’t ask her out himself?”

<You have a point. And if that happens, it’s all over. I guess it’s a possibility, considering what she’s said and done before. I suppose you could write to Seron instead and urge him to confess, but I don’t think that’ll spur him into action.>

“That’s true.”

<And we can’t just wait around hoping Megmica will come around and confess to Seron one day. As Seron’s friends, we only have two options. Push him into a risky situation that could pay off, or let him stagnate in his current position.>

You thought for several dozen seconds.

And though you were silent, Jenny waited patiently.

* * *

“She said I had to play matchmaker.”

Everyone bursts into laughter. They were expecting something more serious.

“Come on,” you say, “There were these two people in the club who liked each other—”

You lie to your classmates. You could not tell them the truth. But at the same time, you pray that your lie becomes a reality.

“She asked me to tell them before I left. If one of the club members did this, they would get caught, so *I* had to spill the beans instead.”

As the class applauds, someone asks,

“So did you do it?”

* * *

At the Capital District Airport, you wrote to Megmica just as Jenny instructed.

‘Did you by any chance notice how SC Seron feels about you? It’s been on my mind the whole time I was in the newspaper club. I’m very sorry if this comes off as nosy to you.’

Jenny assured you that she would tell you the whole story, no matter what the outcome. You wanted to hear how it turned out, but at the same time did not want to hear it.

But either way, you did all you can.

At the Capital District, you studied, visited places, enjoyed club activities, and did what you could to repay the people who helped you.

As you finished the phone call, you had asked,

“Are you sure this will be a good thing for SC Seron? I’m kind of worried.”

<It’s up to him to capitalize on this opportunity. No one else,> Jenny had replied.

* * *

<It's been a while, SC Jenny.>

<It sure has, newbie. Or I guess I can't call you that any more. Want me to call you by name?>

<It's all right.>

<You're calling from Raputoa, right? Should I call you back?>

<Yes, please. Oh, but I wanted to ask you something quickly.>

<Mhm.>

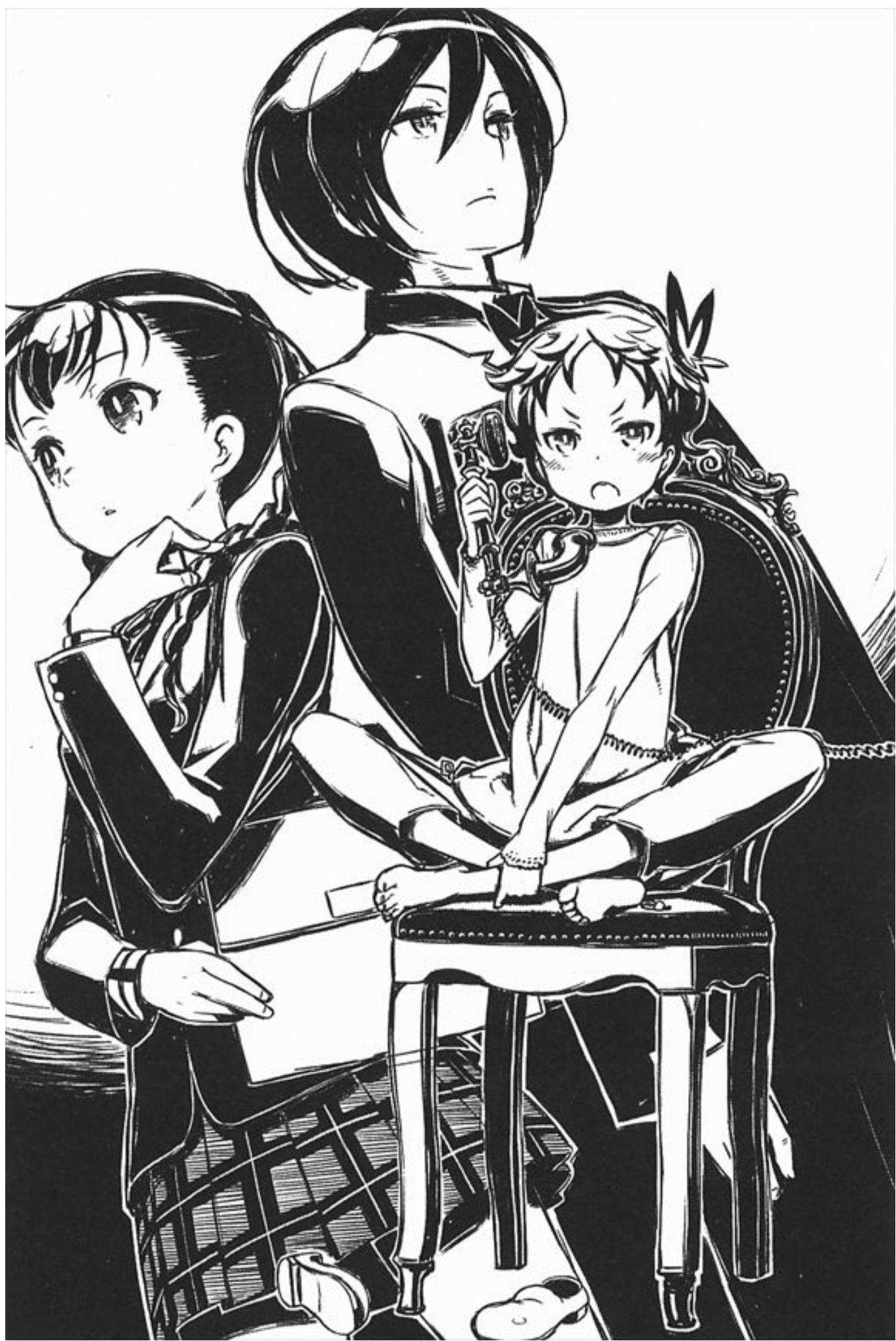
<Did my letter reach SC Megmica? What happened afterwards?>

<Things are turning out as I expected, more or less.>

<What happened?>

<Something big.>

-To be continued-





こんにちは
黒星紅白です。
新聞部部長兼
マスコットキャラクターこと、
ジェニーの活躍を
ニヤニヤしながら
見てる黒星紅白が、
結構キモいんですけど。
僕には、どうする事も
出来ないです。